



## Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 9 | Issue 3

Article 8

May-2008

# Deconstructing *Islamization* in Pakistan: Sabiha Sumar Wages Feminist *Cinematic Jihad* through a Documentary Lens

Rahat Imran

Follow this and additional works at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>

 Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws)

### Recommended Citation

Imran, Rahat (2008). Deconstructing *Islamization* in Pakistan: Sabiha Sumar Wages Feminist *Cinematic Jihad* through a Documentary Lens. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 9(3), 117-154.  
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol9/iss3/8>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

## **Deconstructing *Islamization* in Pakistan: Sabiha Sumar Wages Feminist *Cinematic Jihad* through a Documentary Lens**

By Rahat Imran<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Over half a billion Muslim women live in vastly different lands, cultures, societies, economies, and political systems. Yet, as Iranian scholar Mahnaz Afkhami<sup>2</sup> points out, Muslim women's oppressions are similar due to gender-discrimination under Islamic *Sharia* laws and patriarchal doctrines that are exercised in the name of religion and culture. Pakistan has been a prime example of how religious fundamentalism and politicization of religion can transform a secular society into one held hostage by Islamic extremist doctrines and gender-specific laws. It is a cause for hope and celebration then that its progressive and secular elements, particularly educated, urban women, have continued to wage a struggle against discriminatory socio-political and religious practices through various artistic, political, and activist channels-thereby posing a continuing opposition and challenge to religious fundamentalists that use women as the prime targets for the imposition of their Islamic ideologies and identity. More recently, Pakistani independent women filmmakers have also joined the ranks of this oppositional force, thereby appropriating their right to wage a feminist *jihad* (struggle). In initiating an anti-fundamentalist cinema category, their cinematic contributions deserve to be recognized as part of a larger feminist agenda against gender discrimination and patriarchal domination.

**Keywords:** Pakistani women, feminist documentary film, Islamization and fundamentalism, Islamic Sharia Laws

### **Introduction**

...we realized that the important thing was not the film itself but that which the film provoked. (Fernando Solanas, "Cinema as a Gun". Cineaste, Vol 111, No 2 (Fall 1969) pg-20.

---

<sup>1</sup>The author is a doctoral student at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, Canada. This paper is part of the author's PhD research project on filmmakers from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran, among others from the Muslim world. I wish to acknowledge my professor and PhD supervisor, film and art theorist Dr. Laura U. Marks, Associate Professor at the School for the Contemporary Arts, Simon Fraser University, Canada, for her invaluable guidance and revisions during the writing of this paper.

I would like to thank filmmaker Sabiha Sumar for her generous and kind help in accommodating my request for permission to access data on exhibition, sales and rental records for her films distributed by *Women Make Movies*, New York, USA. Lastly, on a personal note, I wish to extend a very special thanks to Imran Munir, Momin Imran, and Dr. Manzur-ul-Haq Hashmi for all their delightful support and encouragement.

<sup>2</sup>Afkhami, Mahnaz. "Gender Apartheid, Cultural Relativism, and Women's Human Rights in Muslim Societies". Women, Gender, and Human Rights: A Global Perspective. ed. Marjorie Agosin. Rutgers University Press, USA, 2001.(pg-234).

Today, one can find a substantial body of literature on films made in the Muslim world and by Muslims filmmakers, both men and women. This is a clear indication that the film tradition has been successfully and defiantly used by Muslim men and women,<sup>3</sup> for both artistic and consciousness-raising purposes, despite claims by orthodox Muslim scholars and clerics that all forms of figural representations, particularly regarding women stepping out in the visual/artistic arena, are ‘un-Islamic’-both as entertainment and representations of women. For example, tracing the history of cinema in Iran following the Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1978, Iranian film critic and historian Hamid Naficy notes that during the time of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, many cinemas were burnt down as a sign of resistance to the ‘corrupting’ Westernized values and regime of the ruling monarch, Reza Shah Pahlavi. This included the burning down of the Rex Cinema in Abadan, killing an audience of over 300 people.<sup>4</sup> Film critic Hamid Dabashi elaborates on the orthodox Islamic historical and theological factors that have served as the background to the friction between modernity/visual representation/cinema and Islamic thought/theology:

Religious opposition to cinema was immediate and emphatic. The earliest efforts to introduce cinema to Iran “drew strong opposition from the Muslim fanatics who despised the human face and body on the screen.” The opposition to cinema, however, is a much more serious doctrinal issue and cannot be dismissed simply as “Muslim fanatics” objecting to an aspect of modernity. At least four major philosophical and doctrinal objections to any mode of visual representation have been made by Muslim theologians, some of which in fact are drawn directly from Platonic influences on Islamic philosophy. The first objection is the

---

<sup>3</sup>Discussions and critiques of filmmakers and films from Muslim countries that have seen their share of fundamentalism, and politicization of religion and socio-cultural practices, and political/colonial upheavals range from volumes on Post-colonial, Maghrebian, North African, Iranian, Turkish and Arab cinema, and also exile and Diaspora cinema pertaining to these regions. For example, see volumes such as: Chaudhuri, Shohini. Contemporary World Cinema: Europe, the Middle East, East Asia and South Asia. Edinburgh University Press, 2005; Colin-Donmez. Gonul. Women, Islam and Cinema. Reaktion Books Ltd. UK, 2004; African Cinema: Postcolonial and Feminist Readings. (ed) Kenneth W. Harrow. Africa World Press, Inc, Asmara, Eritrea, 1999; Colin-Donmez. Gonul. Cinemas of the Other: A Personal Journey with Filmmakers from the Middle East and Central Asia. Intellect Books, Bristol, UK, Portland, Oregon, USA, 2006; Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film. (ed) Oliver Leaman. Routledge, London and New York, 2001; Armes, Roy. Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2005; Naficy, Hamid. An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking. Princeton University Press, Princeton, USA, 2001; Armes, Roy and Malkmus, Lizbeth. Arab and African Film Making. Zed Books Ltd, London and New Jersey, 1991; Tapper, Richard (ed). The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity. I. B. Tauris Publishers, London, New York, 2002; Dabashi, Hamid. Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past Present and Future. Verso Press, UK, USA, 2001; Hillauer, Rebecca. Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers. (Translated from German into English by Allison Brown, Deborah Cohen, and Nancy Joyce). The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, New York, 2005.

<sup>4</sup>For further discussion see Naficy, Hamid. “Islamizing Film Culture in Iran”. The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity. (ed). Tapper, Richard. I. B. Tauris Publishers, London, New York, 2002.

supposition that through any kind of creative visual representation the imaginative faculties will overcome one's reason. The second objection is based on the assumption that sustained reflection on visual representations of real things prevents us from examining the realities they represent. The third objection stems from the historical opposition of the Prophet of Islam to idolatry. Finally, the fourth objection is based on the belief that any act of creation which simulates the actual creation by God is blasphemous. Islamic theology, in both its juridical and philosophical aspects, ultimately failed to adapt to the project of modernity, in either its doctrinal beliefs or theoretical speculations.<sup>5</sup>

Despite such religious constraints, it is significant that what later became Pakistani cinema, after partition from India in 1947, has grown into a large film industry despite government neglect, poor funding and lack of technical resources, and regardless of the country's socio-political regression following Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization in the late 1970's and subsequent media and film censorship policies. Today it is reported to be among one of the ten major film-producing countries in the world, releasing over ninety full-length feature films in all regional languages per year.<sup>6</sup> Only one history of Pakistani cinema has been attempted, by the late Pakistani filmmaker Mushtaq Gazdar, whose volume covers the topic of Pakistani cinema from 1947 up to 1997.<sup>7</sup>

Recently, despite the religio-political constraints that still operate in Pakistan's cultural life and the arts, since 2001 Pakistan has also become host to a successful international film festival, the non-political and non-profit Kara Film Festival, held annually in the country's port city of Karachi to exhibit and promote independent alternative and independent filmmakers and their films from within Pakistan and abroad.<sup>8</sup> Women have long been part of the Pakistani film industry as writers, producers, directors, actresses, and singers;<sup>9</sup> however, their participation in documentary filmmaking is a comparatively recent addition.<sup>10</sup> It is significant to note that they have all chosen documentary film as their feminist tool to question and expose the effects of patriarchy, religious fundamentalism, and gender-specific socio-cultural oppression despite the religio-cultural ethos that could include gender-specific restrictions and limitations on their creative expression as Muslim women filmmakers in an Islamic society. Their

---

<sup>5</sup>Dabashi, Hamid. "On Modernity and the Making of a National Cinema." *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, Future*. Verso, London, New York, 2001. (pg-14).

<sup>6</sup>Accessed at: <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0195778170/002-2223978-4658429?v=glance&n=283155> on July 24, 2007.

For further details on the Pakistani film industry, also nick-named *Lollywood*, as a smaller version of the Indian film industry, *Bollywood*, producing very similar romantic musicals and violent films visit: <http://mazhar.dk/film/history/> Accessed on June 10, 2007.

Also visit: <http://pakistanifilms.tripod.com/> Accessed on July 18, 2007.

<sup>7</sup>Gazdar, Mushtaq. *Pakistan Cinema 1947-1997*. Oxford University Press, USA, 1998.

<sup>8</sup>For details of the *Kara Film Festival*, visit: <http://www.karafilmfest.com/about.htm> Accessed on July 9, 2007.

<sup>9</sup>For further details on Pakistani women's participation in films in these areas visit: <http://mazhar.dk/film/history/> Accessed on: July 20, 2007.

<sup>10</sup>Currently, there are only three Pakistani independent women documentary filmmakers who have also shown their films at international film festivals: Sabiha Sumar, Sharmeen Obaid and Samar Minallah.

contributions and success through this medium emphasizes the need to investigate the significance and effectiveness of contemporary feminist documentary as a tool of resistance and cross-cultural communication in a Muslim society-one that could be seen as a distinctly anti-fundamentalist Muslim feminist documentary category today.

This paper will focus on the work of Sabiha Sumar, an independent Muslim documentarist from Pakistan who has used her films *Who Will Cast the First Stone?* (1988), *Don't Ask Why* (1999), and *For a Place Under the Heavens* (2003) to investigate and de-construct<sup>11</sup> the transformation and Islamization of Pakistani society from a secular identity to one that has been held hostage by politically motivated religious fundamentalism since 1977. In particular, the paper will explore the impact and implications of fundamentalist Islam on the rights and conditions of women as represented in Sumar's documentary films, and evaluate the significance of her documentaries as a feminist pedagogical tool for activism, resistance, and cross-cultural consciousness-raising in terms of what could be termed as a Muslim woman filmmaker's feminist cinematic jihad<sup>12</sup> through a documentary lens against politically-motivated religion-based socio-political and gender-discriminatory practices and interpretations of Islamic doctrines.

Advocate and political analyst A. G. Noorani elaborates on the common misperception of jihad as a purely physical struggle or exercise, used by fundamentalist elements to establish a mis-founded superiority over other religions and beliefs:

The Jihad is not one of the five pillars of Islam. It is not the central prop of the religion, despite the common Western view. But it was and remains a duty for Muslims to commit themselves to a struggle on all fronts-moral, spiritual and political-to create a just and decent society, where the poor and vulnerable are not exploited, in the way that God had intended man to live. Fighting and warfare might sometimes be necessary, but it was only a minor part of the whole jihad or struggle. A well-known tradition (hadith) has Muhammad say on returning from a battle "We return home from little jihad to the greater jihad", the more difficult and crucial effort to conquer the forces of evil in oneself and in one's own society in all the details of daily life'.<sup>13</sup>

To foreground the discussions on Sumar's documentaries, the paper will be situating Pakistan in historical context through an inquiry into the politically motivated Islamization<sup>14</sup> process that began to engulf the country in the late 1970's as a result of General Zia-ul-Haq's eleven year long dictatorship which sought the formation of a

---

<sup>11</sup>I will be using the term 'deconstruction' for *Islamization* in Pakistan as per its English language connotation of analysis, and not exclusively as a Derridean theoretical framework.

<sup>12</sup>A moral, spiritual, political, or physical struggle and resistance encouraged and sanctioned by Islam when faced with a threat to one's life, faith, or rights. This struggle can be non-violent or assume the form of warfare. I have used it in my arguments as per its provision of a 'non-violent' struggle. For further details on the various connotations of '*jihad*' in Islam, see Noorani, A. G., Islam and Jihad: Prejudice versus Reality, Zed Books, The University Press, London, UK, 2002. (pgs 43-57).

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. (pg-49).

<sup>14</sup>Hence, I choose to use the term and connotation of 'politicization of Islam' rather than the more commonly used Western construct of 'political Islam', as this latter label tends to negate or/and undermine the spiritual aspects of the Islamic religion and faith, which in fact has been 'politicized' for vested interests by ruling regimes.

national Islamic identity through a recourse to extremist interpretations of the Quran<sup>15</sup> and Sharia<sup>16</sup>, and officially undermined women's social and legal rights, and subordinated them to men as second class citizens in their own countries.

It is important to mention here that despite the fact that Sumar's films have been shown and won awards at various international film festivals, my search for theoretical/scholarly critiques of Sumar's documentaries could not locate any substantial literature on her work, save a few brief and sketchy film reviews and a couple of interviews on the Internet.<sup>17</sup> It is the intent of this paper to address this gap by evaluating the contribution of her documentary films as tools for feminist resistance against fundamentalist religion, and their significance as audio-visual spaces for recording testimonial counter-history of Pakistan's state endorsed religious fundamentalism since 1977.

### ***Who Will Cast the First Stone?***

Sabiha Sumar,<sup>18</sup> arrived back in Pakistan in the midst of General Zia-ul-Haq's *Islamization* process in the 1980s with a degree in political science and filmmaking from Sarah Lawrence College, New York, and a post-graduate degree in international relations from Cambridge University in England. With the gender-discriminatory *Zina Hudood Ordinance* already firmly entrenched in the country's legal system, Sumar undertook a study of women convicted under this *Ordinance*. As a result of her findings, and the compelling despair and helplessness of these women in the face of a legal system designed to erode their rights as individuals and citizens rather than protect them, Sumar

---

<sup>15</sup>The holy text of the Muslim faith.

<sup>16</sup>Socio-religious law of Islam based on the *Quran*, dating back more than 1400 years, and the *Sunnah* (the Islamic Traditions based on Prophet Mohammad's life). For detailed discussion on the origins of the *Sharia* see "Intellectual Background: Islamic Sources of Information and the Development into Islamic Law". Accessed at: <http://www.mwlnusa.org/publications/essays/sources.html> on August 6, 2007.

<sup>17</sup>Perhaps this gap is in itself indicative of the sad fact that today Pakistan has become widely synonymous with fundamentalism and terrorism internationally, despite the continuing internal tensions and struggles between these pockets and liberal and progressive forces, which include its artists, writers, journalists, and other scholars, both men and women. This struggle is once again in evidence as Pakistan's civil society, particularly its urban, educated, middle classes, continued to oppose and protest against the imposition of Emergency Rule by the current military dictatorial president, General Pervez Musharraf on November 3, 2007, thereby placing complete curbs on the media, freedom of expression and movement, and a free judiciary.

<sup>18</sup>Her documentary films, aired largely on television, scrutinize problems and conflicts faced by women in her native Pakistan, especially as that country moves towards deepening *Islamization*. Sumar's films include: *Who Will Cast the First Stone?* (1988), *Where Peacocks Dance* (1992), *Don't Ask Why* (1999), and *For a Place Under the Heavens* (2003), *Silent Waters* (2003), *Dinner with the President: A Nation's Journey* (2007), and *Rafina* (under production). In 1992, she founded a film company by the name of Vidhi Films, and established the Centre for Social Science Research in Karachi, Pakistan. Her first narrative feature film, *Silent Waters*, screened at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival, has won seven international awards at various film festivals, including South Africa, France, Argentina, Germany and Australia. At the 2003 Locarno International Film Festival, *Silent Waters* won the Golden Leopard Award for best film, a Leopard for best actress for Kirron Kher, and three other awards. Accessed at: <http://www.sundancechannel.com/festival/juror/?ixContent=7460> on June 27, 2007.

For further details on awards for *Silent Waters* visit: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0357283/awards> Accessed on July 3, 2007.

and like-minded friends initiated a signature campaign for the repeal of these laws.<sup>19</sup> Taking her protest further, she embarked on the production of her first documentary film, *Who Will Cast the First Stone?* on the topic of the *Zina Hudood Ordinance* and its impact on women. The film, an observational and participatory documentary, aired on Channel 4 in Britain and went on to win the *Golden Gate Award* in San Francisco.<sup>20</sup>

The title of Sabiha Sumar's 1988 documentary film *Who Will Cast the First Stone?* is a direct religious reference to, and critique of, the imposition of the *Zina Hudood Ordinance*, and the punishment of stoning to death prescribed for adultery and extra-marital sex in rigid Islamic societies.<sup>21</sup> The film, shot in 1988, the year General Zia-ul-Haq dismissed a civilian government and dissolved the National Assembly on the grounds that the process of *Islamization* was not being conducted adequately, was made without the No Objection Certificate (NOC)<sup>22</sup> required from the government of Pakistan for all filming, and subsequent exhibition rights subject to censorship clearance within the country.<sup>23</sup> Sumar's courageous intent to investigate and document individual case studies through interviews with women and men who had been implicated, convicted or imprisoned at the time under the *Zina Hudood Ordinance*, is complemented by interviews with lawyers and judges, religious scholars and leaders, women's rights

---

<sup>19</sup>Khan, Sairah Irshad. "I've had no support from Pakistanis at home. " Interview with Sabiha Sumar. Newsline Monthly Magazine, September, 2005. Accessed at: <http://www.newsline.com.pk/NewsSep2005/index.htm> on June 13, 2007.

<sup>20</sup>However, within Pakistan, Sumar was unable to show her film despite the fact that by then a democratically elected and progressive woman Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, was in power after Zia's death. Despite such a reception in her own country, Sumar proceeded to make several other documentaries and a feature film that have been shown on Channel 4, German and French television, and various international film festivals. For further details see Khan, Sairah Irshad. "I've had no support from Pakistanis at home. " Interview with Sabiha Sumar. Newsline Monthly Magazine, September, 2005. Accessed at: <http://www.newsline.com.pk/NewsSep2005/index.htm> on June 13, 2007.

<sup>21</sup>For example, in March 2002, a Nigerian woman, Amina Lawal, was sentenced under the Islamic *Sharia* laws to be stoned to death in Bakori, northern Nigeria. According to reports, she had confessed to having had a child out of wedlock while divorced. Under the *Sharia* laws pregnancy outside of marriage constitutes sufficient evidence for a woman to be convicted of adultery or fornication. The man named as the father of her baby girl reportedly denied having sex with Amina, and his testimony as a man was considered enough for charges against him to be dropped. For full story see "Amina Lawal: Sentenced to Death for Adultery". Amnesty International, 19 August 2002. Accessed at: <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/nga-010902-background-eng> on July 9, 2006.

However, following immense international outrage and pressure, an appeals court overturned Amina Lawal's conviction on the basis that her sentence was invalid because she was already pregnant when the *Shariah* law was implemented in her home province. For details of the verdict, see Koinange, Jeff. "Woman Sentenced to Stoning Freed". CNN, February 23, 2004. Accessed at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/africa/09/25/nigeria.stoning/> on July 9, 2007.

<sup>22</sup>Production notes: *Who Will Cast the First Stone?* (Sabiha Sumar, 1988).

<sup>23</sup>Having shot the film without the mandatory No Objection Certificate required for filming from the Pakistan Ministry of Culture would have automatically barred Sumar from exhibiting her film in Pakistan, where, because of strict state censorship policies, in all likelihood such a film topic at the time would not have been granted an NOC from the government of Pakistan. A film unauthorized for exhibition by the Pakistan Censor Board can be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years, or with fine which may extend to one *lac* rupees (Rs 100,000), or with both. For further details see Central Board of Film Censors, Government of Pakistan: "Penalties and Procedures". Accessed at: <http://www.cbfc.gov.pk/mpo.html> on November 23, 2007.



activists, and members of non-governmental women's rights organizations (NGO's), lending the exercise a daring, feminist-oriented, activist complicity in the face of what could have been tremendous consequences for all involved in the secret, non-authorized, documentation.

Using both interviews and talking heads, *Who Will Cast the First Stone?* sets out to depict the ordeal of three of the many jailed women, Roshan Jan, Ghulam Sakina, and Shahida Parveen, in the Karachi Central Jail who had been implicated and charged under the *Zina Hudood Ordinance*. Sumar elaborates on her research findings at the time:

At that time women's organisations were already out and up in arms against the Islamic laws used by General Zia-ul-Haq, but I don't think that there were any real figures existing at that time as to what the Hudood Ordinances had actually done, how they had implicated women and what kind of havoc they had played in Pakistani society. So we did a small study at Karachi Central Jail and came up with data on all aspects of the Zina Ordinance. We found that women were primarily in jail for having had extra-marital sex or marrying somebody of their own choice. Many women were locked up because they had gone to the police to report they had been raped; and then found that was used against them as an admission of having had sex outside of marriage. So until the complaint of rape was taken up, the women would languish in jail. There were 69 women in jail at that time-this is the late '80s-and of these, 68 were booked for Zina.<sup>24</sup>

*Who Will Cast the First Stone?* interviews the three women, recording their own accounts and experiences of the Pakistani socio-legal system, and their views on *Sharia* laws and religion. The stories that emerge shed light from women's perspectives on the fundamentalist approach to religion that has manipulated and subjugated their status to strengthen and institutionalize itself. They recount how their own families/husbands have used the provisions and loopholes contained in the *Zina Hudood Ordinance*<sup>25</sup> against them in order to have them put away on charges of adultery, fornication or extra-marital sex, and deprive them of their rights in property cases, child custody or marrying out of choice, and thereby allegedly bringing shame and dishonor to their families.

Roshan Jan, an under trial prisoner languishing in jail for eighteen months at the time, recounts that her husband threw her out, and remarried. When she filed for divorce, in return he falsely accused her of *Zina* (adultery), and had her jailed under the *Zina Hudood Ordinance*. She goes on to explain that as per the law only her husband or father

---

<sup>24</sup>Khan, Sairah Irshad. "I've had no support from Pakistanis at home. " Interview with Sabiha Sumar. *Newsline Monthly Magazine*, September, 2005. Accessed at: <http://www.newsline.com.pk/NewsSep2005/index.htm> on June 13, 2007.

<sup>25</sup>For a critical discussion on the loopholes and implications of the *Zina Hudood Ordinance* and the *Law of Evidence* for women, in particular through a discussion of two case-studies, see Imran, Rahat. "The *Zina Hudood Ordinance* and the *Law of Evidence*", and "Legal Injustices". *Legal Injustices: The Zina Hudood Ordinance of Pakistan and Its Implications for Women. Journal of International Women's Studies (JIWS)* Vol. 7, #2, November 2005. (Pgs87-93). Accessed at: <http://www.bridgew.edu/SoAS/jiws/> on June 18, 2007.



could have had her bailed out at the time, both of whom refused, the husband on the pretext that she is a morally corrupt woman and deserves her punishment, the father on grounds that she has brought dishonour to the family, and should either return to her husband or should stay in prison rather than return to his house. Providing the background to her predicament, Roshan Jan elaborates that both her husband and father had wanted to sell her after she was married off to her husband at nine years of age, and failing to do so because of her resistance, conspired to have her put away on adultery charges.

Shahida Parveen, the second prisoner interviewed, reveals that she was implicated by her first husband for adultery and rape under the *Zina Hudoob Ordinance* after she obtained a divorce from him and remarried out of choice. The Shahida Parveen case received immense attention in the national press in 1987 following a trial court's verdict that both she and her second husband, Mohammad Sarwar, be stoned to death. What led to this conviction was the failure to register her divorce. Pakistani women lawyers and feminist activists Asma Jehangir and Hina Jilani explain:

Shahida was married to Khushi Mohammad. She claimed he had divorced her, after which she married Mohammad Sarwar. Khushi Mohammad denied having divorced Shahida. A divorce deed was placed on record by the defence allegedly bearing Khushi's signature. Under Pakistan's family laws, all Muslim divorces, once pronounced have to be registered. Ninety days after registration, divorce is effective. Shahida's divorce was not registered as required by law. It is the duty of the husband to get the divorce registered. Failure to do so is an offence. Since, however, there is no time bar on registration of the divorce deed, the prescribed offence is ineffective. The trial court ruled Shahida's and Sarwar's marriage illegal. They were convicted of committing rape on each other. A sub-category of rape is defined as "one where a man or a woman have illicit sex knowing they are not validly married to each other". Since the accused had admitted to living together, it was taken as a form of confession.<sup>26</sup>

Reflecting on her predicament, Shahida Parveen explains that as a woman charged and convicted under the *Zina Hudoob Ordinance*, she has been ostracized and stigmatized for life. She fears that on hearing her fate, countless other women may have turned away from seeking divorce, or could have resorted to committing suicide. Her husband's response is that even if she is released, she will most likely become a victim of an honor-killing, a view that is passionately shared and endorsed by the various men that Sumar interviews on the street for their response to such a case and conviction.<sup>27</sup>

The third woman, Ghulam Sakina, narrates that she was implicated and charged under the *Zina Hudoob Ordinance* in "a girl's abduction case and for allegedly being an accomplice to adultery and rape". Explaining the background to her conviction, Sakina recounts that on repeatedly asking back for some money she had lent a neighbour, and the neighbour's refusal to return it, she slapped her. As retaliation, the neighbour's policeman

---

<sup>26</sup>Jahangir, Asma and Jilani, Hina: "The Hudood Ordinances". *The Hudood Ordinances: A Divine Sanction?* Sang-e-Meel Publications, Lahore, Pakistan, 2003 (pg-58).

<sup>27</sup>However, following countrywide protests by human rights activists and women's organizations against the verdict, Shahida Parveen and Mohammad Sarwar's convictions were overturned on appeal and a re-trial of their case. Ibid. (pg-58).

husband had her implicated as an accomplice in an abduction case that was reported in his jurisdiction. As a result of her conviction, Ghulam Sakina reveals that she had to spend four years in prison, taking her one-and-a-half year old daughter with her, while her husband remarried in her absence and refused to get her out on bail.

Against a backdrop of the above cases that illustrate the wide net and loopholes that support the *Zina Hudood Ordinance* against women, Sumar interviews various activists, lawyers and judges who reveal opposing views on the subject. What emerges are the many tensions and contradictions that had taken root in the Pakistani society in the wake of religious fundamentalism, and continue to hinder women's freedoms, secularism and religious tolerance in the country. Approached by Sumar for his views on the *Ordinance* and its negative implications for women, a former judge of the Federal *Shariat* Court, Justice Zahoor-ul-Haq categorically defends the *Sharia* laws as divine and supreme, arguing that they cannot be meddled with or amended by human beings. He lays particular emphasis on the *Law of Evidence*<sup>28</sup> as necessary to promote a pious society. Turning around the issue of the *Law of Evidence* as unjust and discriminatory, Haq ardently defends it in what comes across as a comical comment were it not for the seriousness, and the authoritative and patriarchal power that such a mindset represents. Says he: "If women could testify on their own behalf and accuse men as perpetrators in rape cases, it would become an impossible society for men to live in".<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, the film shows several feminist activists criticizing *Islamization* and *Sharia* laws as nothing more than patriarchal ploys to subjugate and terrorize women, particularly the already marginalized segments who are the most likely to be economically dependent on men, illiterate, and without recourse to legal aid or even understanding of the laws under which they can be implicated or convicted.<sup>30</sup> Nusrat

---

<sup>28</sup>The *Law of Evidence* (The *Qanun-e-Shahadat*) states that the testimony of a female is considered half that of a man's in a Pakistani *Sharia* court of law. The *Law of Evidence* draft was introduced into the Parliament, known as the *Majlis-e-Shoora* (The Council of Islamic Ideology) under Zia-ul-Haq, in 1983, and passed in 1984. Its members were nominated by Zia, and not elected. For details see Jahangir, Asma and Jilani, Hina. *The Hudood Ordinances: A Divine Sanction?* Sang-e-Meel Publications, Lahore, Pakistan, 2003. (pgs-30-31) and "The Law of Evidence". *Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?* Vanguard Books. Lahore, Pakistan, 1987. (pg-106).

<sup>29</sup>It is pertinent to mention here that as a retort to the absurdity of the Judge's assertion, in voice-over Sumar includes the narration of the *Safia Bibi* case study in which a sixteen-year old blind girl rape victim was asked to identify her rapists. Failing to do so, and on account of her consequent pregnancy, the *Sharia* court sentenced her to three years in prison, fifteen lashes and a fine. This case and the verdict have remained consistent grounds for feminist opposition to the *Law of Evidence*. For details see *ibid.* (pgs-103-105).

<sup>30</sup>Dorothy Q. Thomas of the Human Rights Watch explains in her report on Pakistan: The discriminatory treatment encountered by women who enter the criminal justice system reflects the treatment of women as second-class citizens by Pakistani society at large. Given this subordinate status, once a woman is in prison it is extremely unlikely that she will possess the knowledge or the means to secure even the minimal protections due to her under law, or that such efforts as she makes will be given credence. Eighty percent of all female prisoners in Pakistan are illiterate and nearly 90 percent live on a monthly family income of less than 40 dollars. According to a survey conducted in 1988, over 90 percent of the 90 women prisoners interviewed in two prisons in Punjab were unaware of the law under which they had been imprisoned. Over 60 percent had received no legal assistance whatsoever. Thomas, Dorothy Q. "Double Jeopardy: Police

Azam, a feminist activist points out points out to Sumar: “there has always been an emphasis on controlling women’s sexuality. Now it is being done for personal reasons by men through legal terms and channels”.

Another feminist activist, and a founding member of the *Women’s Action Forum* (WAF)<sup>31</sup> Nasreen Azhar comments:

The *Zina Hudood Ordinance* is an easy option for men to use if they want to put a woman away or get rid of her. All they have to do is charge her under this law if they want property or to get married again as it will be years before an accused woman will have her case come up for a hearing.

Later in the film, Azhar categorically states that our “main fight is against the Mullah (Muslim clergy)”, thereby nailing gender-discrimination in society directly to the prevailing *Islamization* and politicization of religion. Similarly, Asma Jahangir<sup>32</sup> a human rights activist and lawyer, points out the loopholes in the *Law of Evidence* with an example: A man can go into an all-girls hostel and commit gang-rape and still get away with a simple denial because women cannot testify on their behalf and need the testimony of four male witnesses to prove rape under the *Zina Hudood Ordinance* and the *Law of Evidence*. As for a woman, she can be implicated under the same law even on mere suspicion of having had extra-marital sex...And even if a woman does manage to prove her innocence and be freed, she will forever be stigmatized and face an unsympathetic attitude from the police, society and the system.

Former Acting Chief Justice of the Pakistan Supreme Court, Justice Dorab Patel, stresses the need for the reinterpretation of *Sharia* laws according to the times since the seventh century, and goes on the record with his own incisive criticism and disapproval of the *Zina Hudood Ordinance*:

The *Ordinance* has created two types of citizens-Muslims on the one hand and non-Muslims and women on the other. Muslims cannot be convicted on the evidence of non-Muslims, but non-Muslims can be convicted on the evidence of Muslims. For example, if there is a theft in my house, and I am

---

Abuse of Women in Pakistan”. *Human Rights Watch Report*, 1991. (pg-5). Accessed at: [www.hrw.org/pakistan](http://www.hrw.org/pakistan) on July 20, 2007.

<sup>31</sup>The *Women’s Action Forum* (WAF) was formed in 1982 by educated urban middle-class Pakistani women in response the gender-discriminatory laws introduced by General Zia-ul-Haq. as part of his *Islamization* process. Its chief aim was to launched a systematic countrywide struggle through advocacy programs, research, writing, pickets, lobbying, street agitation, and press campaigns. For detailed information on the formation and mandate of WAF see Mumtaz, Khawar and Shaheed, Fareeda: “Zia and the Creation of WAF”. *Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?* Vanguard Books. Lahore, Pakistan, 1987. (pg-71).

<sup>32</sup>Asma Jahangir has also served as the Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) and UN’s Special Rapporteur on Extra-Judicial Killings. She along with her lawyer sister, Hina Jillani, were also the first in Pakistan to set up a free legal aid cell for women in 1980 by the name of AGHS following the imposition of the *Zina Hudood Ordinance*. (The AGHS Legal Aid Cell for Women was so named after the initials of its founding members). For details visit [www.fnst.de/webcom/show\\_article.php/\\_c-1056/\\_nr-1/\\_lkm-1673/i.html](http://www.fnst.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-1056/_nr-1/_lkm-1673/i.html). Accessed on July 5, 2007.

the only witness, I cannot give evidence as I am a non-Muslim, although I may be the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pakistan... And same is the case with men and women regarding the *Sharia*-based *Law of Evidence*.<sup>33</sup>

Sumar caps her documentary debate on religion and the *Zina Hudood Ordinance* with an interview with Begum Raana Liaquat Ali, the wife of the first prime minister of Pakistan following the partition of India in 1947, and the founding member of the *All Pakistan Women's Association*,<sup>34</sup> who categorically opposes any official interference by the state in religion, saying: "State has no business to meddle with religion. Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, made it very clear in his speech after independence that this will be a country where religion will remain a personal and private matter for all majority and minority citizens alike."<sup>35</sup>

*Who Will Cast the First Stone?* juxtaposes the above debates, by both an educated and progressive segment of the society and fundamentalists, with interviews with a cross section of Pakistani women, including another large group of victimized women that share their ordeal in prison prior to being released with the help of the Pakistan Human Rights Commission lawyers and activists, and those working on daily wages in garment factories. What comes across forcefully is that regardless of class barriers and education, both segments strongly oppose state-imposed restrictions on women, calling for a collective mass mobilization to press for judicial reforms and better conditions and status for women as equal citizens. Sumar remarks on her experience of filming these women:

It was about three women in prison, under Islamic law. My film argued for their freedom, or rather they argued in the film, for their freedom... It was sad that these women were asking for their basic rights: to be able to

---

<sup>33</sup>Justice Dorab Patel, belonging to the Zoroastrian faith, was a founding member of the Asian Human Rights Commission [AHRC] in 1987. In 1981 he refused to take a fresh oath under the Provisional Constitutional Order (PCO) promulgated by Gen. Zia, which deprived the superior judiciary of many of its powers- even though as the second senior-most judge of the Supreme Court, he was certain to be the next Chief Justice of Pakistan. He died in 1998. Accessed at: [http://www.southasianmedia.net/profile/pakistan/pk\\_leadingpersonalities\\_humanities.cfm#dp](http://www.southasianmedia.net/profile/pakistan/pk_leadingpersonalities_humanities.cfm#dp) on August 3, 2007.

<sup>34</sup>Founded by Raana Liaquat Ali Khan in 1949, the *All Pakistan Women's Organization* (APWA) was Pakistan's first women's organization after partition and independence from India in 1947. She was also a leading figure in the struggle for Pakistan's independence. For further details visit: <http://www.jazbah.org/raanak.php> Accessed on August 3, 2007.

<sup>35</sup>In his inaugural speech as first Governor General of Pakistan after partition from India in 1947, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, said: "You will find that in the course of time, Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the state." For further details visit: <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9708/India97/pakistan/nation.builder/index.htm> Accessed on July 25, 2007.

decide who they marry or to have the right to fight for the custody of their children.<sup>36</sup>

*Who Will Cast the First Stone?* documents the grim situation for women affected by the *Zina Hudood Ordinance* through their own narrations and testimonies of police brutalities, details the patriarchal and socio-cultural subjugation of their voices and rights, and the biases that oppose their status in the male-dominated judicial system itself.<sup>37</sup> It is significant to note that all the victimized women who speak out are mostly uneducated, and belong to the most economically marginalized sections of the society, and yet demonstrate the courage to vocally oppose on film Zia's dictatorial regime and fundamentalist Islam as contradictory to the dictates of equality and justice in Islam. Speaking out in what could only be termed as daringly abusive language under the circumstances, Ghulam Sakina, one of the women jailed under the *Zina Hudood Ordinance*, abuses and challenges the system and the dictator on the grounds of Islam itself to prove the validity of these laws.<sup>38</sup>

Were it not for the circumstances under which *Who Will Cast the First Stone?* was made, and the women speaking out on film, it would perhaps not be of any significant political or feminist significance in terms of a tool of resistance and activism, and merit attention in retrospect. But, it is the very nature of the suffocation of Pakistani society at the time, and the filmmaker's and her subjects' complicity in their struggle to communicate and expose the injustices imposed on women in the guise of politicized

---

<sup>36</sup>For complete interview see Khan, Sairah Irshad. "I've had no support from Pakistanis at home." Interview with Sabiha Sumar. *Newsline Monthly Magazine*, September, 2005. Accessed at: <http://www.newsline.com.pk/NewsSep2005/index.htm> on June 13, 2007.

<sup>37</sup>For detailed discussions on police brutalities and judicial gender-biases against women in prison charged under the *Zina Hudood Ordinance* see sections on "Rape", "Role of the Police", "Gender Bias in the Criminal Justice System", and "Mistreatment of Victims" in Crime or Custom? Violence Against Women in Pakistan. Human Rights Watch Report, August 1999. Accessed at: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/pakistan/> on June 27, 2007.

Also see Thomas, Dorothy Q. "Double Jeopardy: Police Abuse of Women in Pakistan". Human Rights Watch Report, 1991. Accessed at: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1992/pakistan/> on July 9, 2007.

<sup>38</sup>Ghulam Sakina, one of the women interviewed as a case study in the documentary, shared her fears and concerns at the time: "Where is the dignity in this brand of Islam for women? Women living within the confines of four walls are prone to being dragged to jails due to these laws. What kind of Islam is this bastard trying to impose on us. He is the proverbial one-eyed monster of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. (Zia-ul-Haq had a disability in one of his eyes, and popularly became the target of public ridicule, and later newspaper cartoons and caricatures). May God grant him death. All that remains is to strip women naked in public in the name of religion." Ironically, Ghulam Sakina's words bore terrible truth seventeen years later in 2005 when, after a lifetime of fighting for women's and human rights under the greatest of odds and threats from the state and the clergy, the country's best known woman lawyer, Asma Jehangir, also interviewed in the documentary, was publicly roughed up and partially stripped of her clothes while protesting for women's right to participate in a mixed marathon race, thereby testing the present army dictator, General Perwaiz Mushharaf's, claims of 'enlightened moderation' in Pakistan in his quest to be the chief US ally at the forefront of the "war on terror". She and others were brutally beaten up in public, arrested and piled into police vans as a way of deterring any further protests. For details see "Pakistan Police Arrest Runners in Mixed-Sex Road Race". May 16, 2005. Accessed at: <http://www.cnsnews.com/ViewForeignBureaus.asp?Page=%5CForeignBureaus%5Carchive%5C2005> on June 18, 2007.

Islam, that render *Who Will Cast the First Stone?* a rare and valuable feminist and historical document on film. Denied the right to testify on their own behalf in court, Sumar's subjects are given the equality and rare cathartic opportunity to be their own witnesses and testify without the constraints of the *Sharia* law, patriarchy and state endorsed restrictions. Similarly, the film also serves as an historical documentation given that because of the continued pressure both from international and Pakistani human and women's rights organizations<sup>39</sup> the *Zina Hudood Ordinance* was amended by the Pakistani government, and replaced by the *Protection of Women Bill 2006*<sup>40</sup> signed into Pakistan's Penal Code by President General Pervez Musharraf. The new bill replaces the harsh conditions that previously required victims to produce four male witnesses and exposed them to prosecution for adultery if they were unable to prove the crime

### ***Don't Ask Why***

Sabiha Sumar's next television documentary film on the topic of Islamization, *Don't Ask Why*, was made in 1999, eleven years after the release of *Who Will Cast the First Stone*, as part of the *Girls Around the World* documentary series<sup>41</sup> first aired on Arte, a German-French cultural channel.<sup>42</sup> In a participatory and observational documentary journey through the diary of a seventeen-year old girl, Anousheh, the film probes and records the impact of fundamentalist and politicized Islam on another generation of women growing up under the trend of fundamentalist religion. *Don't Ask Why* records the thoughts and realities of the teenaged girl's life, documenting how Islamic fundamentalist doctrines have continued to filter down in Pakistani society and become further entrenched in another eleven year span since 1988, despite various subsequent civilian governments, including that of Benazir Bhutto, the first woman prime minister of a Muslim country.<sup>43</sup>

*Don't Ask Why* revolves around the thoughts and views of Anousheh, a girl

---

<sup>39</sup> Within Pakistan these have included the *Women's Action Forum* (WAF), the *Human Rights Commission of Pakistan* (HRCP), the *Aurat Foundation*, *ASR (Impact)*, the *AGHS Legal Aid Cell for Women*, and the *Pakistan Women Lawyers Association*, and internationally the *Amnesty International* and the *Human Rights Watch* (HRW), besides pressure from Pakistani women parliamentarians such as the Pakistan People's Party's Sherry Rehman.

<sup>40</sup> For details of the amendments made under the new *Protection of Women Bill 2006*, visit: <http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/legislation/2006/wpbl.html> Accessed on November 20, 2007.

<sup>41</sup> *Girls Around the World* (Directed by Maria Barea, Kaija Jurikkala, Monique Mbeka Phoba, Pascale Schmidt, Sabiha Sumar and Yingli Ma. 1999, 222 minutes) Produced by Brenda Parkerson, *Girls Around the World* is a collection of six documentaries that examine the hopes, dreams and worldviews of a diverse group of 17-year-old girls from across the globe. This series provides a critical cross-cultural perspective into the lives of young women, the concerns they share and the difficult decisions they face as they transition into adulthood. For further details on this series and their directors, visit: *Women Make Movies*. Accessed at: <http://www.wmm.com/filmcatalog/pages/c518.shtml> on June 9, 2007.

<sup>42</sup> Khan, Sairah Irshad. "I've had no support from Pakistanis at home. " Interview with Sabiha Sumar. *Newsline Monthly Magazine*, September, 2005. Accessed at: <http://www.newsline.com.pk/NewsSep2005/index.htm> on June 13, 2007.

<sup>43</sup> To emphasize her focus on her main character's predicament and the thrust of the film as a questioning of the status quo from a teenager's point of view, Sumar confines her own interaction in the film to Anousheh while letting her interact and explore her questions with the rest of the characters in the film, and then confiding in her diary and the director.

belonging to an educated and affluent family in Karachi in which the father figure has accepted and internalized the influence of Zia's *Islamization*. Through her reflections and disappointments as a direct consequence of the socio-religious constraints on her freedoms, all the while aspiring to the very normal and ordinary pleasures and freedoms any teenaged girl could want regardless of socio-cultural or religious factors, the film tracks the emerging conflicts and ensuing questions about gender-inequality in Islam for a generation of young women in Pakistan.

The film opens with a bubbly Anousheh painting a moustache and thick eyebrows on her face with an eyebrow pencil, dressing up in jeans and a casual loose shirt like a boy her age would, with a cap on her head and a cigarette dangling from her lips. While her father laughs at her attempt to be like her brothers, he also chides her and tells her to go and change her clothes as it is time for prayer. The incident not only sets the tone for the rest of the film, but also illustrates Anousheh's understanding of her constraints as a woman as she confides to her diary her distaste for her country and the restrictions imposed on her, wishing she could go abroad to settle down and study, and marry out of choice at a time when she has secured a career for herself.<sup>44</sup>

In the next scene, she argues with her mother over the length of a sari<sup>45</sup> blouse to be worn by her at the upcoming wedding of her sister. The mother's nervous statement that it is too short and revealing, and her apprehensions about the father's objections, point to how *Islamization* has altered and seeped into the most trivial and personal of issues in Pakistani society since 1977 and the imposition of the *Sharia* laws.<sup>46</sup> However, Sumar also depicts the triviality of such concerns as the length of a blouse or the symbolism of a *sari* by showing clips of Anousheh and her friends wearing colorful clothes and having fun dancing to the tunes of Indian film songs at her sister's wedding. It is Sumar's way of establishing the contradictions and tensions between socio-cultural realities, and the absurdity of forcefully imposed religious doctrines on a generation that is all too willing to sidestep them.

Very early on in the film Anousheh articulates to Sumar that for the last 17 years her father has ruled her life, and after marriage her husband will rule for the next fifty years. This realization, combined with a passive submission to what her fate might be, serves as a sad comment on the kind of politicized atmosphere in which Pakistani girls of

---

<sup>44</sup>Anousheh's own thoughts in the film on her twenty-seven year old (considered well past the marriageable age for a girl in all conservative Muslim societies) sister's upcoming marriage reveal her absolute distaste for arranged marriages, finding them 'scary', and the lack of choice given to girls to decide their future. On the other hand when asked by Sumar if she would marry someone like her father, Anousheh's instant and touchingly innocent and honest reply is in the affirmative, saying she adores her father.

<sup>45</sup>Another significance that can be attached to this scene is that after *Islamization* set in, one of the most traditional and popularly worn and internationally recognized dress of Indian women, the *sari*, began to be discouraged and identified by the state and fundamentalists as a Hindu dress. The *sari* was further translated by extremist forces as an anti-Islamic symbol that represented Hindus and Indians as infidels.

<sup>46</sup>It is important to point out here that before 1979 and the introduction of Islamization, dress codes, marriage of choice, complaints and cases of adultery, etc, were treated as personal matters, and dictated by individual family traditions and Family Law, respectively. For a discussion on the changes brought about in Pakistan's civil society and institutions following Zia-ul-Haq's *Islamization* in 1977, see Mumtaz, Khawar and Shaheed, Fareeda. "The Veiling and Seclusion of Women". *Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?* Vanguard Books. Lahore, Pakistan, 1987. (pgs-77-98).



her generation have been born and raised, one which can begin to control and suffocate a teenaged girl's aspirations regardless of her belonging to an affluent and educated family. Sumar's depiction of Anousheh's reflection on her predicament heightens the underlying sadness that permeates her characters aspirations and dreams throughout the film, in the process also serving as a collective reflection of girls her age and status who, despite privilege and education, find themselves bound by religious dictates.

Through recordings from her diary<sup>47</sup> Anousheh shares her questions with the filmmaker and the audience regarding the constraints placed on her by her religion. She is shown asking her father for answers to the limitations placed on her just because she is a Muslim girl, while her brother is not checked for going out with friends or dressing the way he does. Sumar shares Anousheh's investigative journey throughout the documentary as the teenager struggles to understand and come to terms with the limitations placed on her despite her own strong belief in Islam, regular prayers and half-hearted acceptance/ adherence to the answers her father gives her.

Although not an outright rebel in her approach or speech, Anousheh's main thrust and questions to her father, a man she adores but agrees little with privately, revolve around her critique of Islam and its gender discrimination. While accepting her religion as an integral part of her life, she questions why women have to stand behind men to pray, why Islam allows men to have four wives, why she cannot go out to a restaurant to celebrate the end of her high-school exams with her friends, why she cannot dress the way she wishes to, and why she cannot apply to university like some of her friends are beginning to. When Anousheh's questioning gets too intense and direct regarding the issue of gender inequality in relation to her religion and her individual rights, her father, an educated man with whom Anousheh engages throughout her enquiries in the film and who is shown answering all her questions, is quick to tell her to just accept the dictates of the Quran and Islam, and "don't ask why", thereby categorically refusing to enter into a healthy religious debate and critical reevaluation of Islamic doctrines.

Sumar uses this answer as a key to investigating the prevalent patriarchal attitudes towards Islam and the transformation of contemporary Pakistani society from a liberal and secular one to one in which religious intolerance and extremism have become synonymous with piety. Sumar uses such an attitude on the father's part as reflective of the extremist and escapist nature of Pakistani society through fundamentalist interpretations of the Quran and Islam, one which Muslim feminists have begun to question widely, calling for *ijtihad*,<sup>48</sup> a reinterpretation of Quranic injunctions, Sharia laws, and socio-cultural constraints imposed in the name of politicized religion.

---

<sup>47</sup>Asked how much of *Don't Ask Why* is factual, Sumar asserted in her interview: "It's not fiction. It is a documentary based on this young girl's real diary and she plays herself in the film and actually reads aloud from it". Khan, Sairah Irshad. "I've had no support from Pakistanis at home. " Interview with Sabiha Sumar. *Newsline Monthly Magazine*, September, 2005. Accessed at: <http://www.newsline.com.pk/NewsSep2005/index.htm> on July 3, 2007.

<sup>48</sup>Reinterpretation of Islamic doctrines by analogy as per the need for applying them to particular situations or problems. *Ijtihad* is a technical term of the Islamic law that describes the process of making a legal decision by independent interpretation of the sources of the law, the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna*. For detailed discussion on the implications of *Ijtihad* see: "*Ijtihad*: Reinterpreting Islamic Principles for the Twenty-first

Similarly, even at her very young and enthusiastic age, Anousheh is also a symbol of others like her who are all too aware of the constraints placed on them by the society they have been raised in. In a surprisingly mature manner for her age, Anousheh is quick to point out that “here men are like God. If you question them you can be killed... Everything is related to fear: fear of God, of the clergy and religious parties, fathers and so on, and piety because they don’t want to go to hell”. This realization of her constraints is also reflective of a consciousness and silent rebellion taking shape within her to question her subjugation as a girl, and to find the means and ways to change her lot at some stage. For example, in a mark of her quiet rebellion, she is shown dining out and dancing with friends at the very restaurant to which her father forbade her to go, reflective of the fact that what cannot be done with the father’s permission then must find a way behind his back.

On the other hand, Anousheh’s periodic attendance at a madrassa (religious school) run by the women’s wing of an Islamic political party, Jamaat-e-Islami,<sup>49</sup> in search for answers to her religious confusions only strengthens her resolve and understanding that Islam needs to be modernized and reclaimed from the clutches of fundamentalism and extremism. Coming from a seventeen-year-old born and raised in a highly conservative and strict family, this realization on her part serves as tremendous cause for hope that regardless of the constraints, educated girls as young as Anousheh are beginning to consciously reject the imposition of a brand of Islam that curtails their freedoms and aspirations, and offers them little in terms of spirituality.

In one scene, a respectful Anousheh, with her head covered by a scarf, is shown sitting very attentive, but confused and almost scared, in a religious studies class run by young and enthusiastic Jamaat-e-Islami women, clad in heavy veils and burqas<sup>50</sup> even in the company of all women. Preaching the supremacy of the Quran and Islamic doctrines with an emotionally charged emphasis on an orthodox and fundamentalist interpretation of the Quranic text, one by one the speakers claim Islam to be the only righteous path that can truly liberate women without exploitation as, according to them, is the case in the West.

Through the above depiction, *Don’t Ask Why* provides a valuable insight into the organized infiltration of extremist Islam within the ranks of women also, who have been conditioned or brain-washed over the years by patriarchal and politicized interpretations

---

Century.” United States Institute of Peace. Accessed at: <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr125.html> on July 20, 2007.

For further theological discussion on the clash of *ijtihad* as ‘reason’ with modernity see Noorani, A. G. “Ijtihad (Reason) and the Challenge of Modernity”. *Islam and Jihad: Prejudice versus Reality*. Zed Books, The University Press, London, UK, 2002. (pg-105).

<sup>49</sup>*Jamaat-e-Islami*, a religious party founded by Maulana Sayyad Abul A’la Mawdudi in 1941, has been a key player in the politics of Pakistan since its formation in 1947. For a detailed history of the party and its workings and religio-political influence, see Nasr, Seyyed Vali Reza. *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jama’at-i Islami of Pakistan*. University of California Press, Berkeley, USA, 1994, and Joshi, Pooja. *Jamaat-i-Islami: The Catalyst of Islamization in Pakistan*. Kalinga Publications, Delhi, India, 2003.

<sup>50</sup>The *burqa* is a head to toe covering garment worn by very conservative Muslim women in the sub-continent. In Afghanistan, the Taliban government officially enforced the wearing of the *burqa* for all women as a symbol of their religious/fundamentalist government.

of their faith and the continuing gender-specific suffocation in their society, forcing them to collectively and seriously believe that in their lack of choices lies their piety, salvation and freedom.

At the end of the film, when she is denied permission by her father to travel to India for a trip with Sumar, the director questions Anousheh about her predicament of always having to give in to her father, and how she hopes to change anything without breaking with such a pattern of domination? Anousheh's submissive response to accepting her father's decisions as final for the time being is followed by her spirited vocal resolve and determination to "find a way sooner or later to achieve her mission" even though at the moment she is bound by her father's dictates.

While probing realistic concerns about religious fundamentalism and its implications for women's rights and freedoms in Pakistan, *Don't Ask Why* also serves as a feminist documentary of hope in which Anousheh articulates her belief that the Quran needs to be reinterpreted by women in order to claim their rights from within their religion. Perhaps without even realizing her own implication in a feminist jihad, she joins the growing call for *ijtihad* by Muslim feminist scholars and theologians, saying that "men have always interpreted and translated the Quran, but if women took over it would be to their advantage". This surprising enthusiasm and optimism on her part also becomes symbolic of many of her generation and their support for the continuing and growing feminist agenda for change against religious fundamentalism in Pakistan.

Depicting the aspirations and disappointments of a young girl against the backdrop of tensions, conflicts and dictates of politicized Islamization and conservative religiosity, *Don't Ask Why* highlights the realities surrounding the transformation of what used to be a secular society, now held hostage in the name of religion, with women's freedoms as the first target. Through Anousheh's various predicaments and conflicts throughout the film, including her fear that if her father finds her diary, he will kill her as her whole life is recorded in it, and her questioning of her faith and the restrictions imposed on her because of her sex, Sumar highlights the tremendous and frightening difference between her own growing up years in a secular society in which religion and state were separate entities, and how another generation of young women in the same socio-cultural environment is being deprived of simple freedoms and choices in the guise of religion.

The Pakistan that Sumar, and those of her generation, grew up in has been transformed significantly by politicized Islam and the vested political interests of a ruling elite that can ill afford to support a secular society. Sumar laments and sums up her own understanding and realization of what has happened to her homeland in the wake of Islamization:

The only importance we accord our youth is when they become martyrs. You talk to a boy in a village in India, and he'll tell you that he wants to become Shah Rukh Khan. A girl will tell you she wants to become Rani Mukherjee.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup>Denying allegations that she resorts to Pakistan-bashing in her film, Sumar said in an interview that "she had always questioned the system. When she was in the age group of 17 to 25, she would have never joined the women's conservative organization to understand religion as her character in the film did. But things are changing. There was a debate going on in Pakistan about women's rights and the need to interpret the

You talk to a boy in the city of Karachi, the little boy who comes to clean your car window, and he'll tell you 'I want to become a martyr because that way I'll become famous. I'll be a hero.' As for a little girl in Karachi, she doesn't even know how to dream.<sup>52</sup>

Nevertheless, whereas on the one hand *Don't Ask Why* highlights the entrenched impact of religious extremism in Pakistan over the years, Anousheh's character also presents the symbolic face of another generation of prospective feminist activists in Pakistan who are beginning to ask their own set of questions. *Don't Ask Why* specifically opens up areas of questioning that politicized Islam tries to shun or reject, thus becoming a projection of Sumar's feminist cinematic jihad.

### ***For a Place Under the Heavens***

In her third documentary film, *For a Place Under the Heavens*, made in 2003 and dedicated to her daughter Dhiya, Sabiha Sumar takes an autobiographical/personal journey through her hometown of Karachi to document the history and effects of fundamentalism since 1977, and the role played by various governments that have used religion to consolidate their political power and position. The film follows from her two previous documentaries, *Who Will Cast the First Stone?* and *Don't Ask Why*, as this time she goes back to search for answers accompanied by her own little daughter, and through conversations with those among whom she herself grew up. The autobiographical journeys and encounters she records are further complemented with interviews with religious and legal scholars and women from a cross-section of society, including religious activists. The main thrust of the film is to probe and deconstruct the religio-political factors in Pakistan's history that eroded secularism and led to its falling prey to religious fundamentalism.

The film opens with Sumar walking through her childhood home in Karachi, narrating her memories of growing up which included frequent recitations of sufi poetry by her father, music, and her parents lively social life that included entertaining friends with alcoholic drinks.<sup>53</sup> Pointing out her mother in the following clip of her own birthday party as a child from her father's home movie, she remembers her mother telling her that before they moved to Pakistan from Bombay during the partition of the Indian sub-continent, Muslim women wore the veil in India. Sumar recalls that growing up in

---

Koran in a more liberal way". Khan, Sairah Irshad. "I've had no support from Pakistanis at home." Interview with Sabiha Sumar. Newsline Monthly Magazine, September, 2005. Accessed at: <http://www.newsline.com.pk/NewsSep2005/index.htm> on June 13, 2007.

<sup>52</sup>Shah Rukh Khan (actor) and Rani Mukherjee (actress) are both very popular Indian *Bollywood* film stars, equally popular in Pakistan, and around the world, including the Middle East where Indian films are popular even among Arab audiences.

<sup>53</sup>Although consumption of alcoholic drinks and all forms of intoxication are considered forbidden by Islam, they were not prohibited in Pakistan till in a bid to appease religious parties for political gains, Prime Minister Z.A Bhutto imposed a countrywide prohibition and ban on the sale and consumption of alcohol before he was removed from power in 1977. In addition he also imposed a ban on gambling and nightclubs, and announced Friday as the weekly Muslim holiday, replacing it with Sunday which was being identified by religious parties to be a Christian holiday.

Karachi she never saw women veiling, including her mother who now chose not to in her new Muslim homeland, thereby introducing her topic of the changes imposed by Islamization in the late seventies. Throughout the film, she contrasts the changes in her society with repeated clips of completely veiled young girls walking on the beach, depicting them as symbols of the transformation that has been imposed on Pakistani women in the name of religion.

Throughout the film, Sumar inserts discussions with her three girlfriends, Nausheen, Saba, and Aliya,<sup>54</sup> and other women speaking on either side of the fundamentalist debate to present a wide picture of the divisions and tensions within contemporary Pakistan regarding the validity of religious doctrines, the convenient collaboration between the state and clergy, and the constraints these inflict on women's freedom and rights as equal citizens.

Talking of the fairly new trend of veiling with a hijab, both among sections of elitist and middle-class women, in her dialogue with Sumar, Nausheen points out that their generation had never even heard of the word till recently, as it is an import from the Arab world, and alien to the Indian sub-continent. In reply Sumar questions the frightening surge of fundamentalist Islam, saying that her own mother was a deeply religious woman, but never had to take refuge in the present oppressive brand of fundamentalist Islam, thus indicating the continuing deep divide that exists within the various ranks of Pakistani society today.

Through newspaper clippings of significant events in Pakistan's history which led to the present oppressive environment for women, Sumar, along with her lawyer friend, begins to piece together the country's troubled history since its independence from India in 1947, hanging them up in chronological order of socio-political developments in the country. Discussing the significant dates, laws, events, elections, coups, dictatorships, as they emerge from the media clippings and reports, the two women begin to form the pattern of the political upheavals that led to Pakistan's transformation from a secular state to the present Islamization. In the process, both Sumar and Nausheen set out on a personal quest to understand their own alienation in the contemporary Pakistani society, and the extremist trends that seem to have suddenly crept up in the religion they and their contemporaries knew all too well to be a 'personal' matter.

In another scene in *For a Place Under the Heavens*, Sumar shows a large group of middle-aged, heavily veiled women who have taken to covering themselves despite having grown up as educated women in a secular atmosphere. Another trend that Sumar points out is the emergence of the women's-only religious sermons, led by women preachers, that has sprouted in the new fundamentalist atmosphere of the country. As an example, a large group of these completely veiled women is shown attending a trendy and elitist religious gathering, one which Sumar herself attends and describes as one of the many "expensive affairs arranged with meticulous detail in five-star hotels all over the country", a comment that also highlights the role played by social class and money,

---

<sup>54</sup>Sumar introduces her friends on screen as Nausheen, a women's rights lawyer with whom Sumar had worked on a women's legal and political education project in prisons; Saba, who runs a women's development think-tank; and Aliya who works for an independent TV network and is doing her PhD on Islamic Political Thought.

and how effectively they can translate into the organization of a 'pious environment'. Similarly, she depicts another women's gathering at a religious sermon, "in a humble neighbourhood", where a doll is being used in a demonstration by a group of veiled women to educate the all women congregation on the "correct Islamic way to bathe a woman's dead body, and how to drape it in the prescribed white coffin cloth". This eerie and depressing 'educational' clip, and discussion of ways of life that can lead to a place in 'either heaven or hell as there is no escape possible' at both sermons stresses to what an amazing extent extremist religion has seeped in across social and economic divides, in the process dividing Pakistani society itself along secular and fundamentalist ideologies. Following her attendance at both sermons, a somewhat shocked and dismayed Sumar ponders: "Did I say I was born in a secular Pakistan? I guess I was wrong. I now realize that I was raised in a schizophrenic society suspended precariously between Islamic ideology and secularism".

In a discussion about the trend of women's willingness to embrace fundamentalist Islam, Sumar's lawyer friend opines that it has become a convenient way for women in a patriarchal society to maintain the status quo as well as the family structure, thus keeping all concerned happy through a recourse to submissiveness in the name of religion. She remarks that given the economic problems in the country, and the curtailment of their rights in the name of religion, women at the grassroots level, despite their faith, should be far more willing to totally give up on religion. She blames the political, secular and liberal parties in the country for having failed in harnessing such a force at the grassroots level. Sumar's own analysis of this failure is that it would mean challenging the status quo: "Our ruling elites have always been the feudals, the army and the clergy who all have interests tied together. It would take a power struggle to change the balance, which these political parties and women's organizations have been avoiding so far".

Another friend points out that women's recourse to fundamentalist Islam is "an extreme degree of colonization in which the subject colonizes herself and says 'I am fine', resulting in the ultimate expression of oppression".

Showing old clips of a stage dance performance at a nightclub from her father's collection of home films,<sup>55</sup> Sumar reminisces nostalgically about a life her parents knew, and one which she barely got a chance to experience as it evaporated in her own youth and in the midst of politicized religion.

On the other hand, Sumar speaks with Sorraiya, another veiled woman who proudly talks about her son's participation and subsequent 'martyrdom' in what she terms 'Jihad' in Kashmir.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup>Before General Zia-u-Haq came to power, cabaret performances and dancing, casinos, nightclubs and bars were a popular and common nightlife feature among Pakistan's urban elites. After he took power, he banned all these activities, proclaiming them 'un-Islamic'.

<sup>56</sup>At the time of independence from India, the state of Kashmir was also divided into two halves. Pakistan and India have been to war over the Kashmir issue twice, with Pakistan claiming sovereignty over the Indian half as a Muslim homeland for the Kashmiris, and thereby a part of Pakistan. The current stage in the Kashmir conflict can be dated to 1989, when the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) inaugurated an armed uprising against Indian rule. On the other hand, military and other forms of support from the Pakistani establishment, from private *jihadist* groups in Pakistan and elsewhere, in addition to a

Asked if she regrets his decision to go on this 'Jihad', she replies: "I feel the loss as a mother, but when I think of the cause, I see his martyrdom as the greatest honor God could bestow on a person. He has been saved from hell and will go straight to heaven". A justification for Islamic fundamentalism and unnecessary bloodshed one sees all too often these days on television screens and in news reports.

Next, Sumar takes her questions and confusions about such deepening emphasis on fundamentalist Islam to an Islamic scholar, Mufti Nizamuddin, who spends his time teaching Islamic Studies in madrassas.<sup>57</sup> He defends the rise of orthodox Islam, explaining its purpose:

You can think of these schools as ideological centers that are instrumental in paving the way for an Islamic revolution. They have seen an unprecedented growth that would have been unthinkable twenty years ago. They are preparing youth for an Islamic revolution through peaceful and non-violent education, because Islamic revolution cannot be achieved through Western-style democracies and parliamentary systems.

Why Pakistan needs an Islamic revolution is not an issue the cleric delves into. As for the status of women in Islam, Nizamuddin sidesteps the issue by blaming them for failing to achieve their share of power, saying, "they have not demanded their rights. Islam does not stop women from moving forward. They can come forward and take charge." When asked if men in Pakistan would be willing for that to happen, he responds with a sarcastic laugh: "It would take a revolution. No one relinquishes power easily."

Adding another element to the many contradictory levels among the cross-sections in Pakistani society, Sumar introduces a young girl, Hina, who is aspiring to be a successful model. Young, defiant and confident, she dismisses any notions that the state, Islam or society has the right to dictate her life, saying: "You can't totally deny the system, but I do a lot of things and get away with them. You need brains to get past the cracks in the system. I have learned to do that and am immensely enjoying my life". Next, she is shown being made up by male make-up artists for the photo-shoot that follows, showing her posing in a red, revealing dress.<sup>58</sup>

Adding a legal and theological perspective to her enquiry into the rise of fundamentalist Islam, Sumar interviews a former Pakistani provincial health minister and

---

passionate zeal for what is seen as a 'holy' cause, account, in large measure, for the gradual take-over of the armed struggle in Kashmir by militant Islamist groups, mainly based in Pakistan and led, for the most part, by Pakistani nationals. For further details on the issue see Sikand, Yoginder. "Islamist Militancy in Kashmir: The Case of the Lashkar-i-Tayyeba". November 20, 2003. Accessed at: <http://www.sacw.net/DC/CommunalismCollection/ArticlesArchive/sikand20Nov2003.html> on August 3, 2007.

<sup>57</sup>Islamic religious seminaries. Since 1979, these seminaries in Pakistan have also become the hub and training grounds for Islamic fundamentalist ideologies, and the promotion of violent 'jihad' against non-Muslims. For a detailed discussion see Hussain, Zahid. "Nursery for Jihad". Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam. Columbia University Press, New York, USA, 2007. (pg-76).

<sup>58</sup>For a discussion on the many contradictions regarding Pakistani women and their role in contemporary society see: Dawood, Shimaila Matri. "Will the Real Pakistani Woman Please Standup?" *Newsline Monthly Magazine*. March 2007. Accessed at: <http://www.newsline.com.pk/NewsMar2005/cover1mar2005.htm> on July 29, 25, 2007.



legal expert, Shaheen Sardar Ali, at her home in Britain.<sup>59</sup> Asked about the gender discrimination contained in the Quranic text, and how it has been used by fundamentalist forces in the Muslim world to subjugate women, Ali elaborates:

It is interesting that out of the 6,666 verses of the Quran, only six create gender hierarchies. 6660 call for gender equality. How come that in 1400 years of jurisprudential evolution, knowledge and analysis 6660 outweighed the 6? Because it was a male elite who were jurists, judges, scholars, legislators, and rulers and they picked just half a dozen verses to override the others. In terms of gender hierarchies, these half a dozen also came with a pre-condition that males provide for women. From a strictly legal perspective, even this precondition disappears if there are no males in a household, and the woman is the provider.

Ali rejects the notion of confrontational politics when it comes to religion, saying it can be counter-productive as this is a sensitive issue, a view that Sumar rejects as taking refuge in the verses of the Quran, and sidestepping the need for a power struggle if patriarchy and fundamentalism are to be challenged. Says she in voice-over: “Listening to Shaheen I could not help wonder where Christian women would be today if they were still interpreting the Bible?”

Perhaps the most chilling scene, one that really drives home the message that there is an urgent need to curtail fundamentalist Islam in Pakistan, as elsewhere, is one in which the mother whose son was martyred, reads out from his letter talking about the joy he feels at going on Jihad. This is followed by her young, completely veiled daughter-in-law, the wife of her martyred son, supporting the logic of Jihad and martyrdom by preaching their blessings to her orphaned toddler son, asking him emphatically if he is ready for martyrdom, to which the child is shown clapping and saying “yes”. Aspiring for a place under the heavens through such morbid baby-talk sends out an eerie indication of how fundamentalism operates successfully by exploiting children, women and youth as the most vulnerable elements in society, brain-washing and conditioning them into serving its vested political interests in the guise of religion.<sup>60</sup>

Against a backdrop of her engaged in a discussion with her friends, Sumar ponders in voice over: “There is no end to our discussions. Why is there no support, neither financial nor ideological, for secular politics in Pakistan? Clearly people of Pakistan would be willing to buy into an ideology that is relevant to their daily concerns.

---

<sup>59</sup>Shaheen Sardar Ali, was formerly professor of law at the University of Peshawar, Pakistan, Minister for Health, Population Welfare and Women’s Development in the Government of the North West Frontier Province (Pakistan), and Chair of the National Commission on the Status of Women of Pakistan set up by the present regime in July 2000 following great international and domestic pressure to look into possible amendments to the *Hudood Ordinances*. Currently, she teaches Islamic Law at Warwick School of Law in Britain. For further details on her work, visit: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/staff/academic/ali/> Accessed on July 11, 2007.

<sup>60</sup>Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the USA particularly, it has become quite common for Muslim extremist and fundamentalist forces to train young children along the lines of their *jihadist* ideologies in religious seminaries in Pakistan and Afghanistan. An Associated Press story in April 2007 reports the circulation of a video of a 12 year-old Muslim boy beheading another Muslim man accused of being an American spy in the name of *jihad*. For details see “Jihadist Video Shows Boy Beheading Man”. *Asharq alawsat*, 21/04/2007. Accessed at: <http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=1&id=8710> on November 21, 2007.

Why is it that no leader, not even Benazir Bhutto, has been able to reverse the trend of Islamization and put the ghost of General Zia-ul-Haq to rest?" Questions that all secular, progressive, liberal Pakistanis of her generation continue to ask, whether in Pakistan or as part of the Diaspora.

Sumar ends her film with another clip from the earlier home-movie of her own birthday party as a child, merging into a very similar clip of her daughter's birthday party. Concluding her personal journey into the transformation of Pakistani society through women's eyes, lives and beliefs, and the transition from one generation to the next through her own mother and daughter, she reminisces:

It is the same house forty years later, and it is my daughter Dhiya's tenth birthday. I tell Dhiya when people stop asking questions it is a dangerous time. When she grows up I want her to ask does half the nation benefit from being covered under layers of cloth or does the other half benefit? Or is it a small coterie of rulers that benefits at the expense of both?

Throughout the film, Sumar repeats depictions of heavily veiled women as the most obvious symbol of the new phenomena of veiling in Pakistan, despite the fact that there is no state directive to do so. The final scene also shows a large group of them on the beach in Karachi at sunset, approaching and dispersing against the screen in close-up as the film ends, perhaps symbolic of the aspirations of all secular voices in Pakistan who wish to see the disappearance of religious extremism in their country.

Through a personal journey, Sumar captures the tensions between liberal and fundamentalist forces that are playing a role in the transformation of contemporary Pakistan. As all vie for a 'place under the heavens' on either side of the religious debate and practices, women emerge as the foremost victims caught in the midst of it all, deprived of independent choice.

### **Analysis of Sumar's Documentaries**

#### *Feminist Documentary Style:*

As an independent filmmaker from Pakistan, a country and society influenced by patriarchal and fundamentalist religion, Sabiha Sumar has had to not only negotiate the means to produce and distribute her films through international funding. In doing so, how far has she been able to make her subjects complicit in a feminist political struggle to secure and create a political space within which Pakistani Muslim women's voices against, and under, fundamentalist and extremist religion can be represented and recorded? Also, because of the use of documentary film as the medium of her investigation and representation, as was the case in the Western activist film movements in the 70's, how effectively has Sumar been able to renew it into a political and pedagogical tool to communicate contemporary Pakistani women's gender-specific oppressions cross-culturally for a collective feminist activism and bonding within the Muslim world, and beyond? Feminist film critic and theorist Julia Lesage points out that feminist documentary film's particular objective is politically motivated towards fighting and challenging patriarchal domination of women. Lesage elaborates:

[T]he women's very redefining of experience is intended to challenge all the previously accepted indices of "male superiority" and of women's supposedly "natural"

roles. Women's personal explorations establish a structure for social and psychological change and are filmed specifically to combat patriarchy. The filmmaker and her subjects' intent is political.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, Sumar's use of 'talking heads' in all three of her films lends effectiveness to her political intent of giving voice to a cross-section of Pakistani women through their own narratives. Defending the merits of "the visual dullness of talking heads' as a narrative style<sup>62</sup> in feminist documentary, Lesage points out its utility to the fostering of women's empowerment:

In all the feminist documentaries, the soundtrack usually told in the subject's own words, serves the function of rephrasing, criticizing, or articulating for the first time the rules of the game as they have been and as they should be for women...The film gives voice to that which had in the past been spoken for women by patriarchy.<sup>63</sup>

Film scholar Barbara Halpern Martineau notes the implications of different documentary techniques used by feminist filmmakers to put their message across. Martineau stresses that women speaking directly to an audience communicates an instant speaker/viewer relationship, thereby creating a feminist bonding for change and resistance. She discusses the use of talking heads as a style particularly effective for conveying a feminist message:

It seems useful at this point to make a general distinction between the use of talking heads to represent some official or authoritative position, and the use of talking heads of people who are telling their own stories. Another, more formal three-part distinction can be made among: 1) Interviews where the subject addresses someone who is either off-screen or on; 2) candid or informal discussions filmed in close-up; and 3) direct address to the camera, where the subject appears to be talking to the audience.<sup>64</sup>

Using a combination of participatory and observational documentary modes<sup>65</sup> in all three of her films, which are also interlaced with her own autobiographical details and political questions and comments through voice-overs, Sumar manages to draw in the viewer to participate in a history that may be remote culturally and geographically, but invites feminist bonding and identification against oppression. Stressing that

---

<sup>61</sup>Lesage, Julia. "The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film". Issues in Feminist Film Criticism. (ed) Patricia Erens. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, USA, 1990. (pg-224).

<sup>62</sup>Ibid. (Pg-233).

<sup>63</sup>Ibid. (pgs- 233-234).

<sup>64</sup>Halpern Martineau, Barbara. "Talking About Our Lives and Experiences: Some Thoughts About Feminism, Documentary and "Talking Heads"". Waugh, Thomas. (ed). "Show Us Life": Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary. The Scarecrow Press, Inc. Metuchen, N.J., and London, 1984. (pg-259).

<sup>65</sup>Documentary film critic Bill Nichols identifies six main types of documentary film and video: "In documentary film and video, we can identify six modes of representation that function something like sub-genres of the documentary film genre itself: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, performative. These six modes establish a loose framework of affiliation within which individuals may work; they set up conventions that a given film may adopt; and they provide specific expectations viewers anticipate having fulfilled. For a detailed discussion of all six types of documentary film as listed by Bill Nichols, see Nichols, Bill. "What Types of Documentary Are There?" Introduction to Documentary. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, USA, 2001. (pgs-99-138).

documentary film can follow several different courses to depict and represent realities, and communicate them cross-culturally, Nichols elaborates that 'It stands for a particular view of the world, one we may never have encountered before even if the aspects of the world that is represented are familiar to us.'<sup>66</sup>

Sumar's films also serve as feminist counter-history/revisionist accounts of women's oral testimonies and critiques of the effects of Islamic fundamentalist Sharia laws and doctrines, and their rejection of a politicized version of religion that undermines their status as equal citizens. In his evaluation of a feminist recording of history, film theorist Michael Renov discusses the representation of history from particular standpoints, and the feminist critique that addresses the biases such representations can have when recorded through a patriarchal lens:

Historical discourse has, after all, come to be regarded as the representation of people, forces and events from a particular perspective. Feminists, for example have reminded us that the attention in standard history texts to military milestones rather than to the transmission of societal values merely replicates the patriarchal bias-(his)tory over hers. If we can say that history belongs to those with the power to re-present it, little wonder that film and video practitioners have come to share the revisionist historian's suspicion for top-down institutional accounts.<sup>67</sup>

Sumar's choice of documentary film as her vehicle for feminist counter-historiography can also be seen as part of the larger, global sway towards the documentary mode. Renov discusses the developments that have shaped documentary film production styles since the 1970's. Noting the participation of documentary filmmakers from diverse cultural and historical backgrounds, Renov elaborates on the growth of documentary filmmaking as a personalized medium of representation:

By 1990, any chronicler of documentary history would note the growing prominence of work by women and men of diverse cultural backgrounds in which the representation of the historical world is inextricably bound up with self-inscription...In the domain of documentary film and video, the scattered frameworks through which the social field came to be organized were increasingly determined by the disparate cultural identities of the makers. The documentative stance that had previously been valorized as informed but objective was now being replaced by a more personalist perspective in which the maker's stake and commitment to the subject matter were foregrounded. What had intervened in the years between 1970 and 1990 that might have contributed to this effusion of documentary subjectivity?<sup>68</sup>

Answering his own query, Renov attributes the changes and evolution of the documentary film style to the feminist movement of the times, and its new and changing

---

<sup>66</sup>Ibid. (pg-20).

<sup>67</sup>Renov, Michael. 'The Subject in History: The New Autobiography in Film and Video'. The Subject of Documentary. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 2004. (pg-109-110).

<sup>68</sup>Ibid. "New Subjectivities: Documentary and Self-Representation in the Post-verite Age", (pg-176).

demands for new styles to further its cause and communicate its message on diverse issues. Renov elaborates:

Instrumental to this sea change was the feminist movement, whose revaluation of the prior alternative political structures suggested that social inequities persisted, internal to the movement. Young men challenged the authority of their fathers to establish state policy but left intact gendered hierarchies...The women's movement changed all that and helped to usher in an era in which a range of "personal" issues –race, sexuality, and ethnicity-became consciously politicized.<sup>69</sup>

Sumar's documentary films can be evaluated in the light of Renov's 'Four Fundamental Tendencies of Documentary' as 1) to record, reveal, or preserve; 2) to persuade or promote; 3) to analyze or interrogate; and 4) to express.<sup>70</sup> Renov points to the significance of depicting ethnography/history in documentary films to catch the fleeting moment, while the medium also has the ability to offer different versions on the same event/occurrence. He stresses that film can offer revisionist versions of both history and ethnographical accounts through interviews, etc, with the videomaker functioning as a historiographer recording oral histories: 'These oral histories remain valuable for their ability to bring to public notice the submerged accounts of people and social movements.'<sup>71</sup> In summary, Sumar's use of a conventional documentary style thus serves as an effective and accessible feminist technique.

### **Representation and the Politics of Identity:**

It may also be asked, given her own Western-educated and liberal middle-class urban background, what authentic agency and commitment does Sumar as a feminist activist in a Muslim country have to understand the plight of underprivileged and marginalized women? On the other hand, could a woman undertake what Sumar has done without a Western education and class privilege? Does her own participation in her films change the address by creating a class hierarchy between herself and the marginalized women whom she gives the chance to speak out, or does her participation break the hierarchies through identification with shared histories of religious fundamentalism and its potential effects for all Pakistani women, in the process becoming not only instruments of cross-cultural communication but also cross-class communication?

Considering that as even among Pakistani women everyone's experiences will be subject to their particular station in life-class-socio-economic and cultural factors, and personal experiences- leading to varying standpoints, their gender-specific marginalization and subordination renders them subject to collective discrimination. Thereby, it can be argued that in their own way Sumar's films also work from what feminist scholar Sandra Harding defines as a feminist standpoint framework,<sup>72</sup> by placing

---

<sup>69</sup>Ibid. (pg-177).

<sup>70</sup>"Towards a Poetics of Documentary" Theorizing Documentary. (ed) Renov, Michael. Routledge, New York, London, 1993. (pg-21).

<sup>71</sup>Ibid. (pg-27).

<sup>72</sup>For detailed discussion of Feminist Standpoint Epistemology see Harding, Sandra. "Feminist Standpoint Epistemology". Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York 1991. (p-119); Harding, Sandra. "From Feminist Empiricism to Feminist

particular emphasis on Pakistani Muslim women's own perspectives and critique on issues of their religious constraints, oppression and marginalization, regardless of class.

Taking a post-colonial stance, Vietnamese-American feminist documentarist and film theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha stresses the need to revisit history for a reinvestigation and deconstruction of the past through the eyes and narratives of those who themselves have been the victims of violent histories, as opposed to the colonization of their histories and sufferings through representations by the dominant colonizers/masters representations.<sup>73</sup> It can be argued in Sumar's favour that she fulfills Trinh's advocacy by exploring Pakistani women's issues as an 'insider', thereby breaking new ground by using her privilege to reclaim the right of marginalized women to record and explore their histories themselves, both from within their own ranks as agents of resistance and for an international audience. Sumar's films give these women, regardless of class distinctions, to present their own sense of the history and events that have molded and affected their lives—on the national and personal levels—their distinct memories, oppression, and marginalization as Muslim women, citizens, and as believers.

Speaking from a 'post Third World' perspective, film scholar Ella Shohat suggests that third-world feminisms have very different and diverse problems and areas in which to fight and reclaim their rights, which is perhaps all the more true when seen in the light of religion and religious fundamentalisms and socio-cultural taboos and constraints. Given these factors, Sumar's representation and critique of a past that allowed for a secular society and tolerance in Pakistan, despite being a Muslim state, and without disowning her own or her subjects' Muslim identity, further complicates these women's fight against extremist religion at multiple levels—gender, class, religion and national identity, and resistance against inequality without the rejection of any of these factors. Such a situation also calls for a distinctly Muslim feminist framework for resistance, as opposed to an all encompassing Western-style feminism that does not distinguish between the diversities—historical, racial, cultural, ethnic, religious, or socio-political differences, taboos, limitations, identities, obligations and loyalties. For example, Anousheh's dilemma about obeying her father in *Don't Ask Why?* in contrast with her will to break all restrictions that keep her from enjoying equal rights and freedoms as a woman, highlight not only similar dilemmas faced by other Muslim girls and women, but also the need for collective feminist resistance that would address their particular brand of socio-political and religious limitations. Here the question also turns into one of claiming basic human rights as opposed to the privileged and advanced Western constructs of feminism which may not cater to their specific needs and problems. Shohat calls for a revision of feminist film theory, saying that "In cinema studies, what has been called "feminist film theory" since the 1970s has often suppressed the historical, economic, and cultural contradictions among women".<sup>74</sup> Shohat argues for the need to

---

Standpoint Epistemologies". The Science Question in Feminism. Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1986. (pg-136).

<sup>73</sup>For detailed discussion see Trinh T., Minh-ha. "All-Owning Spectatorship". When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics. Routledge, New York, London, 1991. (pg- 81).

<sup>74</sup>Shohat, Ella. "Post-Third-Worldist Culture: Gender, Nation and the Cinema". Rethinking Third Cinema. (eds) Guneratne, Anthony R. and Dissanayake, Wimal. Routledge, New York and London, 2003. (pg-52).

examine issues of nation, race, and gender regarding third world women because they are negotiating and conducting their resistance against oppression on several and very different levels as compared to Western feminists. She argues for new paradigms to view post-Third world feminist work as opposed to using the old paradigms of Eurocentrism:

Examining recent Third-World feminist cultural practices only in relation to theories developed by what has been known as “feminist film theory” reproduces a Eurocentric logic whose narrative beginnings for feminism will inevitably always reside with “Western” cultural practices and theories seen as straightforwardly pure “feminism”, unlike Third World feminism, seen as “burdened” by national and ethnic hyphenated identities.<sup>75</sup>

Shohat argues for a distinct post-Third World feminist category that needs to be applied to identify and recognize their work as a separate and distinct entity in order to appreciate and evaluate their work. She stresses that any discussion of third world has to also address the question of the “national”. Shohat elaborates:

To counter some of the patronizing attitudes toward (post-) Third-World feminist filmmakers-the dark women who now also do the “feminist” thing-it is necessary to contextualize feminist work in national/racial discourses locally and globally inscribed within multiple oppressions and resistances. Third-World feminist histories can be understood as feminist if seen in conjunction with the resistance work these women have performed within their communities and nations. Any serious discussion of feminist cinema must therefore engage the complex question of the “national”.<sup>76</sup>

We need to understand Sumar’s work in relation to the above; her constraints, limitations, socio-cultural history, and class. And then the religious bind so very specific to Muslim women trying to expose the effects of Islamic fundamentalism, while at the same time not disowning their own Muslim identities. This in turn also runs them the risk of incurring the wrath of religious factions that are quick to label them as pro-West, and thus ‘infidels’.

Sumar and her films can be seen as agents of change and resistance that have challenged and countered these dominant official, patriarchal, and fundamentalist forces, and their versions of gendered boundaries and history in Pakistan, through documenting the sufferings of women victimized by Islamization. Similarly, in the process, both Sumar and her female subjects have also broken the socio-cultural and religious spatial barriers that can set limits on their appearance in the public domain. Extending the argument, it can be questioned that how has Sumar’s filmmaking intervened in the Islamic politics of space, both in its content and as a practice? Moroccan feminist scholar Fatima Mernissi elaborates on the Islamic theological significance of gendered spatial boundaries that have tended to restrict women’s public participation in rigid and fundamentalist Islamic societies:

---

<sup>75</sup>Ibid. (pg-53).

<sup>76</sup>Ibid. (pg-54).



Muslim sexuality is territorial: its regulatory mechanisms consist primarily in a strict allocation of space to each sex and an elaborate ritual for resolving the contradictions arising from the inevitable intersections of spaces. Apart from the ritualized trespasses of women into public spaces (which are, by definition, male spaces), there are no accepted patterns for interactions between unrelated men and women. Such interactions violate the spatial rules that are the pillars of the Muslim sexual order. Only that which is licit is formally regulated. Since the interaction of men and women is illicit, there are no rules governing it...Any transgression of the boundaries is a danger to the social order because it is an attack on the acknowledged allocation of power. The link between boundaries and power is particularly salient in a society's sexual patterns.<sup>77</sup>

Evaluating Sumar's work as a feminist filmmaker in the context of her own constraints as a Muslim woman operating from within 'Islamic' spatial boundaries, it can be argued that she is not only evolving a feminist film counter-historiography practice aimed at exposing and addressing Islamic extremism and religious fundamentalism within the Islamic world, but also challenging and breaking the specified 'social order' and the linked 'allocation of power' pointed out by Mernissi. In the process, she defiantly re-appropriates her own and her subject's share in the public sphere without compromising their own Muslim identity or beliefs.

### **Issues of Funding, Distribution, and Pedagogical Contribution**

Regardless of the well-meaning political and feminist intent of filmmakers such as Sabiha Sumar, it needs to be addressed how this entire filmmaking exercise as a pedagogical and legislative tool be made possible without funding, distribution and possibilities for exhibition; how could the 'subalterns' in Sumar's films, including herself in the context of her socio-political and religious contexts, find a voice that, though it may be banned from being heard within their own countries, can still have the potential and possibility to find their way to cross-cultural audiences and international exhibition sites? Do her films become a 'hybrid' exercise in their own way by using foreign funding to tell their indigenous/local histories and stories of oppression? It can also be charged that Sumar, and many like her from the Third World, rely on foreign/Western funding to promote their struggles for change, but in the process of doing so can inadvertently become the promoters of an elitist neo-colonial agenda that can ironically undermine the real issues of the people Sumar purports to represent and give voice to. Foreign funding also raises the question of how much power and control can independent filmmakers like Sumar, whose documentaries are all funded by foreign/Western production sources, exert in their representations and production.

These issues in turn raise questions such as who are these films being produced for, where do they circulate, and what pedagogical value/influence do they wield? Ella

---

<sup>77</sup>Mernissi, Fatima. "The Meaning of Spatial Boundaries". *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. (eds) Lewis, Reina and Mills, Sara. Routledge, New York, 2003. (pg-489).

Shohat elaborates on the significant factors that can influence and determine the outcome of a representational exercise:

Sensitivity around stereotypes and distortions largely arises, then, from the powerlessness of historically marginalized groups to control their own representation. A full understanding of media representation therefore requires a comprehensive analysis of the institutions that generate and distribute mass-mediated texts as well as the audience that receives them. Whose stories are told? By whom? How are they manufactured, disseminated, received? What are the structural mechanisms of the film and media industry? Who controls production, distribution, exhibition?<sup>78</sup>

To argue in her favour as an independent filmmaker, if Sumar's films could be funded only from international sources, and would largely be viewed by human rights and feminist supporters outside of Pakistan, then she has used these opportunities to produce feminist counter-history documentaries as tools for cross-cultural and cross-class communication, thereby securing the authority and opportunity for her subjects to get their voices heard across cultural and geographical boundaries for feminist activism and solidarity.

For example, an analysis of Sumar's distribution and exhibition records<sup>79</sup> obtained from their US-based distributor Women Make Movies shows that two of her documentaries discussed in the paper, *Don't Ask Why* and *For a Place Under the Heavens*, have largely been in circulation, both through video rentals and sales, in American universities, colleges, schools, women's organizations, human rights organizations such as the Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and various Asian and women's film festivals. These are complemented by several rentals/sales to various academia and similar organizations in Canada, Australia, Sweden, Japan, Taiwan, Lebanon, and Israel. Given this data, it is apparent that Sumar's documentaries find their exhibition and market among mostly Western and international audiences as an educational/pedagogical tool for creating awareness against religious fundamentalism. It would also mean then that Muslim women filmmakers such as Sumar have little choice than to be dependent on foreign funding and audiences to create and exhibit their works and foster their activism. Little seems to have changed, despite technological advancements and broadening of media outlets worldwide, since Bhabha noted the dependence of Third world cinemas on the West in 1986:

A large film festival in the West-even an alternative or counter-cultural event such as Edinburgh's 'Third Cinema' conference-never fails to reveal the disproportionate influence of the West as cultural forum, in all three senses of the word: as place of public exhibition and discussion, as place of judgment, and as market-place. An Indian film about the plight of Bombay's pavement-dwellers wins the Newcastle Festival which then opens up distribution facilities in India. The first searing expose of the Bhopal disaster is

---

<sup>78</sup>For a detailed discussion on the politics of realism, historical representation, and colonial and racial marginalization on screen see Shohat, Ella and Stam, Robert. "Stereotype, Realism, and the Struggle over Representation". Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media. Routledge, London and New York, 1994. (pgs-178-219).

<sup>79</sup>Data on exhibition, sales and rental records obtained by permission of Sabiha Sumar from her distributor Women Make Movies in New York, USA, on July 2, 2007.

made for Channel Four. A major debate on the politics and theory of Third Cinema first appears in *Screen*.<sup>80</sup>

Sumar's use of documentary film as an activist tool of for resistance against fundamentalist Islam is no doubt made possible by recourse to Western funding and institutions which have an interest in issues relating to Muslim women, Islam and effects of extremist religion on women and societies. Western audiences further support these films by patronizing the struggles depicted in them, leading to awards and recognition at international film festivals and other exhibition sites. For example, reflecting on film practices of Arab women filmmakers, film theorist Laura Marks notes the Western notions that can give direction to foreign funding and the resultant films:

Notions that oppressed Arab women must be saved from oriental patriarchy in general and Islamic patriarchy in particular inform the funding priorities, content, titles, and marketing strategies of productions. Arab mediamakers may package work for export in an act of preemptive self-Orientalism intended to meet the interests of an outside audience.<sup>81</sup>

Another critique that can be directed at Sumar is her own elitist class background and Western education. How do these factors situate her in terms of authenticity, and as a committed Muslim activist/feminist with a Western training to enter into a socio-political struggle to represent marginalized and oppressed women in her home country? On the contrary, it can be argued in her favour that given the fact that there were no filmmaking academies in Pakistan at the time Sumar set out to make her first documentary film, *Who Will Cast the First Stone?* in 1988, she could only have made it with a foreign/Western education in the field, which in turn would only have been possible given her own economic class. Thus, using a Western training and education to support and act on behalf of marginalized groups in Pakistan, Sumar furthers the scope for not only an audio-visual cross-cultural communication but also cross-class communication.

Emphasizing the utility and impact of 'documentary' film as a means by which a 'cinema of subversion' can be advanced, and the status quo of the 'System' challenged Third Cinema exponents, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino elaborate:

The cinema known as documentary, with all the vastness that the concept has today, from educational films to the reconstruction of a fact or a historical event, is perhaps the main basis of revolutionary filmmaking. Every image that documents, bears witness to, refutes or deepens the truth of a situation is something more than a film image or purely artistic fact; it becomes something which the System finds indigestible... Pamphlet films, didactic films, report films, witness-bearing films-any militant form of

---

<sup>80</sup>Bhabha. Homi K., "The Commitment to Theory". *Questions of Third Cinema*. (eds) Pines, Jim, and Paul Willemen. 1989. London, BFI, 1989. (pg-113).

<sup>81</sup>Marks, Laura U. "What Is That *and* Between Arab Women and Video? The Case of Beirut." *Camera Obscura* 18.2 (2003) 40-69. (pg-8).

expression is valid, and it would be absurd to lay down a set of aesthetic work norms.<sup>82</sup>

Similarly, given the limitations regarding training, funding, and means of exhibition for women filmmakers in Muslim countries like Pakistan, it would be equally absurd to lay down a set of conduct and barometer for authenticity and motives for filmmakers like Sumar who have used their Western education, training and foreign funding precisely to facilitate and further their agendas for feminist resistance. Sumar's choice of documentaries as her vehicle for activist resistance, with their capacity to travel across cultures through sub-titles and dubbing, cater to an international audience as a pedagogical tool.

## Conclusion

Sabiha Sumar has used her documentary films as a means to investigate, deconstruct and record the history of her native Pakistan in order to expose and highlight the effects of Islamization there. All three of her films, *Who Will Cast the First Stone?*, *Don't Ask Why* and *For a Place Under the Heavens*, depict a broad cross-section of Pakistani society to give a wide picture of the tensions, conflicts and contradictions that prevail in the struggle between secular, progressive voices and fundamentalist elements vying for an extremist Islamic identity that is largely still unacceptable to the socio-cultural fabric of the country, and has been opposed continuously by its liberal, progressive segments, of which Sumar herself is a member.<sup>83</sup>

Sumar's documentary enquiries into the roots of fundamentalism in Pakistan since 1977, its continuing surge in the guise of politicized Islam, its fallout on women in the form of patriarchal and gender-discriminatory laws and practices that curtail their rights and freedom, and the equally significant resistance to these developments by women's organizations, human rights lawyers, and other activists presents a historical documentation from a feminist perspective. In turn, her films also serve as valuable historical testimonials through first-hand accounts, views and perspectives of those directly affected by the changes in their society, even if Pakistan returns completely to its secular origins someday.

Although all three of Sumar's documentaries discussed in the paper address Julia Lesage's concern about such films serving as a means towards consciousness-raising to combat patriarchy, and in turn serving as a political tool for feminist resistance, ironically Sumar has not been able to publicly show her documentaries in Pakistan because of their content and the pro-Islamic tilt in the country's censorship policies. However, by showing them in the West she has used them as a feminist cross-cultural political tool to expose the impact of fundamentalist Islam on a cross-section of women and the

---

<sup>82</sup>Solanas, Fernando and Getino, Octavio. "Towards a Third Cinema." *Movies and Methods*. (ed) Bill Nichols. University of California Press, Berkley, USA, 1994. (pgs-55-56).

<sup>83</sup>Recent countrywide outbreak of protests and victory by the civil society in Pakistan against religious extremism and the imposition of Emergency Rule on November 3, 2007 by the present military dictator, General Pervez Musharraf, as a result of which strict curbs on freedom of expression and the media have been put into effect, once again highlight Pakistani society's rejection of fundamentalist and dictatorial policies, as does the return to democratic rule following the March 2008 national elections.

curtailment of their rights. As Muslim women breaking their own Sharia-induced and Orientalist images and stereotypes,<sup>84</sup> Sumar and her feminist subjects have also filled a valuable vacuum by documenting the history of their country, one that had slim chances to be documented on film from a feminist/activist perspective. Pakistani women's coming forward to share their sufferings, ordeals, predicaments, and progressive views in Sumar's films serves to establish these Muslim women's defiance in breaking the Islamic gender-specific spatial boundaries and limitations that Fatima Mernissi points out as particular to the social status of women in Islam, and which can thereby serve as a hindrance in their public participation. In doing so, they have announced their entry into an arena where not only can they be seen, but also show to the world the curtailment of their human rights, and the horrific effects of politicized Islam and its manipulation of women's status as a mark of its patriarchal power over women. As insiders questioning and challenging their own socio-religious constraints and gendered histories, these women and the filmmaker have become complicit in waging their own brand of feminist cinematic jihad that stands up against injustice and gender-specific persecution directed towards them in the name of religious identity. Like journalist and documentary filmmaker John Pilger's<sup>85</sup> various documentaries on the ravages of wars and human rights violations around the world, Sumar's documentaries also make their significant contribution as a traveling history/documentation by a Muslim woman filmmaker that gives victims of religious fundamentalism a voice that can transcend geo-political barriers and be heard far and wide to attract attention and muster support for social and political change.

I have argued that Sabiha Sumar, by selecting a medium associated by Muslim fundamentalists with Western values that corrupt, particularly in terms of exploitation of women, has been instrumental in waging a feminist cinematic jihad against religious extremism, one that manipulates and controls women's identities as the first site and instrument of its ideological imposition, while not only maintaining and upholding her own religious and cultural identity, but simultaneously insisting on inventing a new and progressive gender identity for all Muslim women who oppose religious extremism as nothing more than a patriarchal construct that needs to be urgently revised through the provision of *ijtihad*. If Muslim extremist and terrorist organizations such as the Al Qaida have used film and video to preach to fundamentalist groups and train militants to launch their brand of militant jihad, a Muslim woman has used the same medium as a peaceful

---

<sup>84</sup>For further discussions on the Western Orientalist representations of Muslim women see readings in Lewis, Reina and Mills, Sara. (eds) "Harem and the Veil". Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader. Routledge, New York, USA, 2003. (pgs.489-586).

Also see Shohat, Ella and Stam, Robert. "The Imaginary of the Harem". Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media. Routledge, London and New York, 1994. (pgs-161-177).

For a sampling of Orientalist representations as portrayed in Hollywood films see *Hollywood Harems*. (Tania Kamal-Eldin, 24 minutes. *Women Make Movies*1999).

For a discussion of what is Orientalism as identified by Edward Said, and which has since become a theoretical framework to study how the Western media and other representations tend to look at the Middle East and Muslim societies, see W. Said, Edward. Orientalism. Pantheon Books, New York, USA, 1978.

<sup>85</sup>For complete details on John Pilger's writings and films visit: <http://pilger.carlton.com/> Accessed on August 3, 2007.

weapon to wage her secular jihad by investigating and showing the fallout of such dangerous ideologies on society, particularly women. Ideologies that allow a woman the freedom to strap on explosives and go on suicide bombing missions in the name of jihad, but restrict her going shopping without a male escort, as was the case in Afghanistan after the Taliban came to power.

In revisiting and deconstructing and representing her country's history herself, a factor upon which Trinh T. Minh-ha lays great stress, Sumar has been able to take, and show, an insider's view from the periphery of religious fundamentalism, using her own memories, nostalgia and autobiographical details as the launching pad to establish an activist and feminist stance while avoiding giving value-judgments herself. Throughout, Sumar's documentaries stress that whereas on the one hand religious fundamentalism may seem to be expanding its power base, on the other the resistance and rejection of it has not wavered either. As she hangs up the press clippings in *For a Place Under the Heavens*, the deconstruction of Pakistan's foray into fundamentalism becomes a sad symbol of her own generation's suspended fate in the air at the hands of Islamization-violated, misled, manipulated, troubled and at war with itself from within-symbolizing today's Muslim religious fundamentalism globally.

The use of documentary film by Sabiha Sumar as a medium to record, represent, and disseminate Pakistani women's voices, their specific socio-cultural, political and religion-based gender-specific oppressions has also served the purpose of archiving and preserving their respective histories as insiders through a feminist lens. This re-visiting of their pasts to question the impact of patriarchal domination and subjugation in the name of politicized Islam has also resulted in valuable testimonial proof of these women's oppressions in their own words, resulting in a collective feminist effort from within their own socio-cultural spaces to create feminist audio-visual documentations as opposed to being represented/stereotyped by foreign researchers/documentarists or human rights organizations as statistical case-studies.

Perhaps within fundamentalist and extremist circles in Pakistan it could be argued or insinuated that Sumar has used foreign funding and collaboration to fund and exhibit her projects, and in a bid to claim international fame has defamed and exploited her own national and Muslim identity and the sanctity of Islamic doctrines, representing them to the West as barbaric, backward and not in accordance with the dictates of Islam. But has she sold out in a quest for fame, or has she used that platform to give a rare voice and opportunity to some of the most marginalized people in her country, an opportunity that the state itself has robbed them of in the guise of politicized religion and socio-cultural constraints? Taking up Ella Shohat's concern about who controls the telling and the means of production, it is quite apparent in Sumar's films that she seems to be making a conscious effort not to impose her directorial power, and as far as possible allow her subjects to do the telling, regardless of whether they are victimized women in jail, men on the street, lawyers, religious scholars and theologians, women who have willingly embraced fundamentalist Islam, or a teenaged girl questioning the gender-inequalities inherent in the religion she so loves otherwise. Shohat's concern about giving marginalized groups the chance to tell their own stories, manifests itself in Sumar's documentaries even more dramatically considering that both the director and her subjects

have been affected by, and are operating from within, a society that has become notoriously paranoid about its Islamic identity, media censorship policies and women's status as second class citizens in the wake of Islamization.

Considering the changes and developments that have evolved in the world post 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA, and Pakistan's participation as the frontline partner against the global war on terror, Sumar's efforts can be seen as a Muslim woman's pioneering cinematic jihad in its quest to deconstruct and identify the root causes of Islamic fundamentalism in her country, stressing that Muslim women were the first victims of Islamic gender-terrorism. In drawing cross-class and cross-cultural attention in all her documentaries to the predicament of Pakistani Muslim women under the dictates of fundamentalist Islamic doctrines and laws, Sumar also gives credence to the 'legislative role' of the documentary filmmaker that film theorist Bill Nichols identifies, one that can address common topics for conceptualization in documentary films, such as war, violence, etc, and the challenge of creating a persuasive voice in the documentary for the filmmaker in order to create awareness and consensus on an issue for initiating change. This, Nichols believes, in turn can play a 'legislative role' by revisiting history and creating the space for change and justice by calling for action and review of a situation.<sup>86</sup> In Islamic theological terms, Sumar's cinematic exercise can also be seen as a struggle towards jihad, calling for a re-interpretation of Islamic doctrines and laws to do justice in the present.

I argue that Sumar's documentaries can be viewed as a new emergent feminist film genre from within the Muslim world—a feminist cinematic jihad in the Islamic sense of the concept of jihad—as a legitimate struggle against oppression and human rights violations. Given Pakistan's experience of Islamization since 1977, Sabiha Sumar's films become valuable audio-visual socio-political documentary proofs of historical memory and human-rights violations in the name of politicized religion, in turn supportive of the global resistance against these subversive elements.

What remains to be seen is how much effect do such films have in terms of raising consciousness among the women they are made about and societies that need to be educated by them the most—their own. For now it can be appreciated that regardless of the funding sources, Muslim women filmmakers<sup>87</sup> such as Sabiha Sumar have begun to create an emergent, distinctly anti-fundamentalist religion, film category—what may today be termed a cinematic jihad, one that has the capacity to travel across temporalities, and cultural and geographical divides through the film medium.

---

<sup>86</sup>Nichols, Bill. "What Types of Documentary Are There?" Introduction to Documentary. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, USA, 2001. (pg-74).

<sup>87</sup>For example, other Muslim women filmmakers who have chosen film as a means of their activism and resistance against fundamentalist religion in their respective countries which have also experienced the ravages wreaked by extremist and politicized religion, include Sharmeen Obaid (Pakistan), Samar Minallah (Pakistan), Ziba Mir Hosseini (Iran), Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri (Iran) Yassamin Maleknasr (Afghanistan/Iran), Munizae Jahangir (Afghanistan/Pakistan), Saira Shah (Afghanistan) and Nilofer Pazira (Afghanistan/Canada). (This paper is part of the author's PhD research project that includes detailed work on the above-mentioned filmmakers, among others from the Muslim world).



## **Bibliography**

- Afkhami, Mahnaz. "Gender Apartheid, Cultural Relativism, and Women's Human Rights in Muslim Societies". *Women, Gender, and Human Rights: A Global Perspective*. (ed). Marjorie Agosin. Rutgers University Press, USA, 2001.
- Amnesty International "Amina Lawal: Sentenced to Death for Adultery". 19 August 2002. Accessed at: <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/nga-010902-background-eng>
- Asharq alawsat, 21/04/2007. "Jihadist Video Shows Boy Beheading Man". Accessed at: <http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=1&id=8710>
- AGHS Legal Aid Cell for Women. Accessed at: [www.fnst.de/webcom/show\\_article.php/\\_c-1056/\\_nr-1/\\_lkm-1673/i.html](http://www.fnst.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-1056/_nr-1/_lkm-1673/i.html).
- Amazon.com Accessed at: <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0195778170/002-2223978-4658429?v=glance&n=283155>
- Armes, Roy and Malkmus, Lizbeth. *Arab and African Film Making*. Zed Books Ltd, London and New Jersey, 1991.
- Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2005.
- Awards for Silent Waters Accessed at: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0357283/awards>
- Central Board of Film Censors, Government of Pakistan: "Penalties and Procedures". Accessed at: <http://www.cbfc.gov.pk/mpo.html>
- Chaudhuri, Shohini. *Contemporary World Cinema: Europe, the Middle East, East Asia and South Asia*. Edinburgh University Press, 2005.
- Colin-Donmez. Gonul. *Cinemas of the Other: A Personal Journey with Filmmakers from the Middle East and Central Asia*. Intellect Books, Bristol, UK, Portland, Oregon, USA, 2006.
- Colin-Donmez. Gonul. *Women, Islam and Cinema*. Reaktion Books Ltd. UK, 2004.
- African Cinema: Postcolonial and Feminist Readings*. (ed) Kenneth W. Harrow. Africa World Press, Inc, Asmara, Eritrea, 1999.
- Dabashi, Hamid. *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past Present and Future*. Verso Press, UK, USA, 2001.
- Dawood, Shimaila Matri. "Will the Real Pakistani Woman Please Standup?" *Newsline Monthly Magazine*. March 2007. Accessed at: <http://www.newsline.com.pk/NewsMar2005/cover1mar2005.htm>
- Erens, Patricia, ed. "Intellectual Background: Islamic Sources of Information and the Development into Islamic Law". Accessed at: <http://www.mwlnusa.org/publications/essays/sources.html>
- Gazdar, Mushtaq. *Pakistan Cinema 1947-1997*. Oxford University Press, USA, 1998.
- Guneratne, Anthony R. and Dissanayake, Wimal, eds.. *Rethinking Third Cinema*. Routledge, New York and London, 2003
- Harding, Sandra. *The Science Question in Feminism*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1986.
- Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York.1991.

- Hillauer, Rebecca. *Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers*. (Translated from German into English by Allison Brown, Deborah Cohen, and Nancy Joyce). The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, New York, 2005.
- Human Rights Watch. *Crime or Custom? Violence Against Women in Pakistan*. Human Rights Watch Report, August 1999. Accessed at: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/pakistan/>
- Hussain, Zahid. *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam*. Columbia University Press, New York, USA, 2007.
- Imran, Rahat. "The Zina Hudood Ordinance and the Law of Evidence", and "Legal Injustices". *Legal Injustices: The Zina Hudood Ordinance of Pakistan and Its Implications for Women*. *Journal of International Women's Studies (JIWS)* Vol. 7, #2, November 2005. (Pgs 87-93). Accessed at: <http://www.bridgew.edu/SoAS/jiws/>
- Jahangir, Asma and Jilani, Hina: *The Hudood Ordinances: A Divine Sanction?* Sang-e-Leman, Oliver. *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film*. (ed) Routledge, London and New York, 2001.
- Meel Publications, Lahore, Pakistan, 2003.
- Jazbah. Accessed at: <http://www.jazbah.org/raanak.php>
- John Pilger. Accessed at: <http://pilger.carlton.com/>
- Joshi, Pooja. *Jamaat-i-Islami: The Catalyst of Islamization in Pakistan*. Kalinga Publications, Delhi, India, 2003.
- Kamal-Eldin, Tania. *Hollywood Harems*. 24 minutes. *Women Make Movies*, USA, 1999.
- Kara Film Festival. Accessed at: <http://www.karafilmfest.com/about.htm>
- Khan, Sairah Irshad. "I've had no support from Pakistanis at home." *Newsline Monthly Magazine*, September, 2005. Accessed at: <http://www.newsline.com.pk/NewsSep2005/index.htm>
- Koinange, Jeff. "Woman Sentenced to Stoning Freed". *CNN*, February 23, 2004. Accessed at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/africa/09/25/nigeria.stoning/>
- Marks, Laura U. "What Is That and Between Arab Women and Video? The Case of Beirut." *Camera Obscura* 18.2 (2003) 40-69.
- Mohammed Ali Jinnah's inaugural speech. Accessed at: <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9708/India97/pakistan/nation.builder/index.htm>
- Movies and Methods*. (ed) Bill Nichols. University of California Press, Berkley, USA, 1994.
- Mumtaz, Khawar and Shaheed, Farida. (eds) *Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?* Vanguard Books. Lahore, Pakistan, 1987.
- Naficy, Hamid. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, USA, 2001.
- Nasr, Seyyed Vali Reza. *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution; The Jama'at-i Islami of Pakistan*. University of California Press, Berkeley, USA, 1994.
- Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, USA, 2001.
- Noorani, A. G. *Islam and Jihad: Prejudice versus Reality*. Zed Books, The University Press, London, UK, 2002. (pg-105).

Pakistan Film Industry. Accessed at: <http://mazhar.dk/film/history/>

“Pakistan Police Arrest Runners in Mixed-Sex Road Race”. May 16, 2005. Accessed at: <http://www.cnsnews.com/ViewForeignBureaus.asp?Page=%5CForeignBureaus%5Carchive%5C2005>

Pakistan Protection of Women Bill 2006. Accessed at: <http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/legislation/2006/wpb.html>

Pakistani Films. Accessed at: [http://pakistani\\_films.tripod.com/](http://pakistani_films.tripod.com/)

Questions of Third Cinema. (eds) Pines, Jim, and Paul Willemsen. 1989. London, BFI, 1989.

Renov, Michael. The Subject of Documentary. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 2004.

Reina, Lewis and Sara Mills, eds. Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader. Routledge, New York, 2003

Said, Edward. Orientalism. Pantheon Books, New York, USA, 1978.

Theorizing Documentary. (ed) Renov, Michael. Routledge, New York, London, 1993.

Shohat, Ella and Stam, Robert. Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media. Routledge, London and New York, 1994.

Sikand, Yoginder. “Islamist Militancy in Kashmir: The Case of the Lashkar-i Tayyeba”. November 20, 2003. Accessed at: <http://www.sacw.net/DC/CommunalismCollection/ArticlesArchive/sikand20Nov2003.html>

South Asian Media. Accessed at: [http://www.southasianmedia.net/profile/pakistan/pk\\_leadingpersonalities\\_humanities.cfm#dp](http://www.southasianmedia.net/profile/pakistan/pk_leadingpersonalities_humanities.cfm#dp)

Sundance Film Festival: Accessed at: <http://www.sundancechannel.com/festival/juror/?ixContent=7460>

Sumar, Sabiha. Don’t Ask Why. 1999, 58 minutes. Pakistan.

----- Who Will Cast the First Stone? 1988, 52 minutes. Pakistan

----- For a Place Under the Heavens. 2003. 53 minutes. Pakistan

Tapper, Richard (ed). The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity. I. B. Tauris Publishers, London, New York, 2002.

Thomas, Dorothy Q. “Double Jeopardy: Police Abuse of Women in Pakistan”. Human Rights Watch Report, 1991. Accessed at: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1992/pakistan/>

Trinh T., Minh-ha. When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics. Routledge, New York, London, 1991.

Warwick School of Law in Britain. Accessed at: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/staff/academic/ali/>

U.S. Institute for Peace. Ijtihad: Reinterpreting Islamic Principles for the Twenty-first Century. Accessed at: <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr125.html>

Waugh, Thomas. (ed). “Show Us Life”: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary. The Scarecrow Press, Inc. Metuchen, N.J., and London, 1984.

Women Make Movies. Accessed at: <http://www.wmm.com/filmcatalog/pages/c518.shtml>